ISSUE 23

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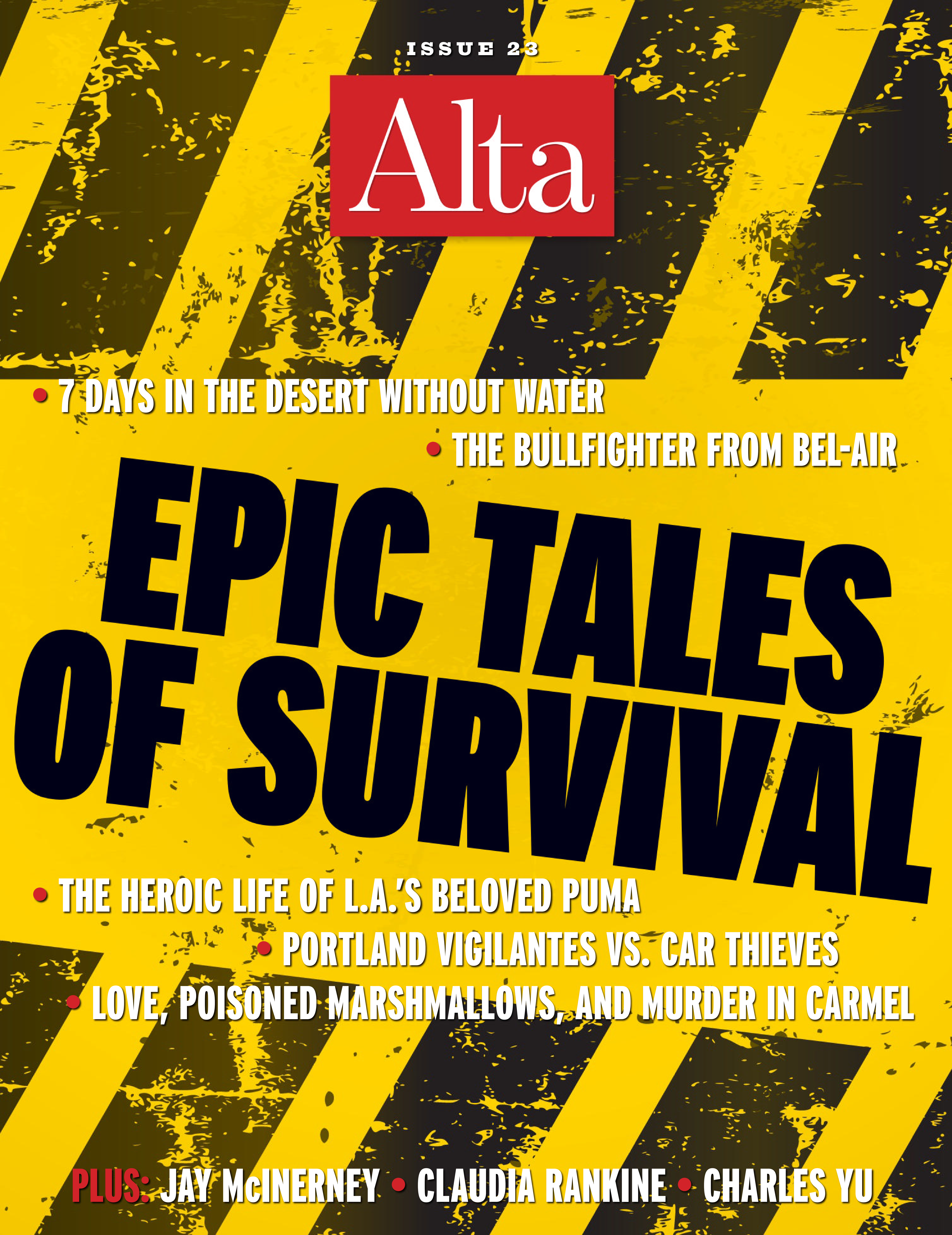

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- THE BULLFIGHTER FROM BEL-AIR

EPIC TALES OF SURVIVAL

- THE HEROIC LIFE OF L.A.'S BELOVED PUMA
- PORTLAND VIGILANTES VS. CAR THIEVES
- LOVE, POISONED MARSHMALLOWS, AND MURDER IN CARMEL

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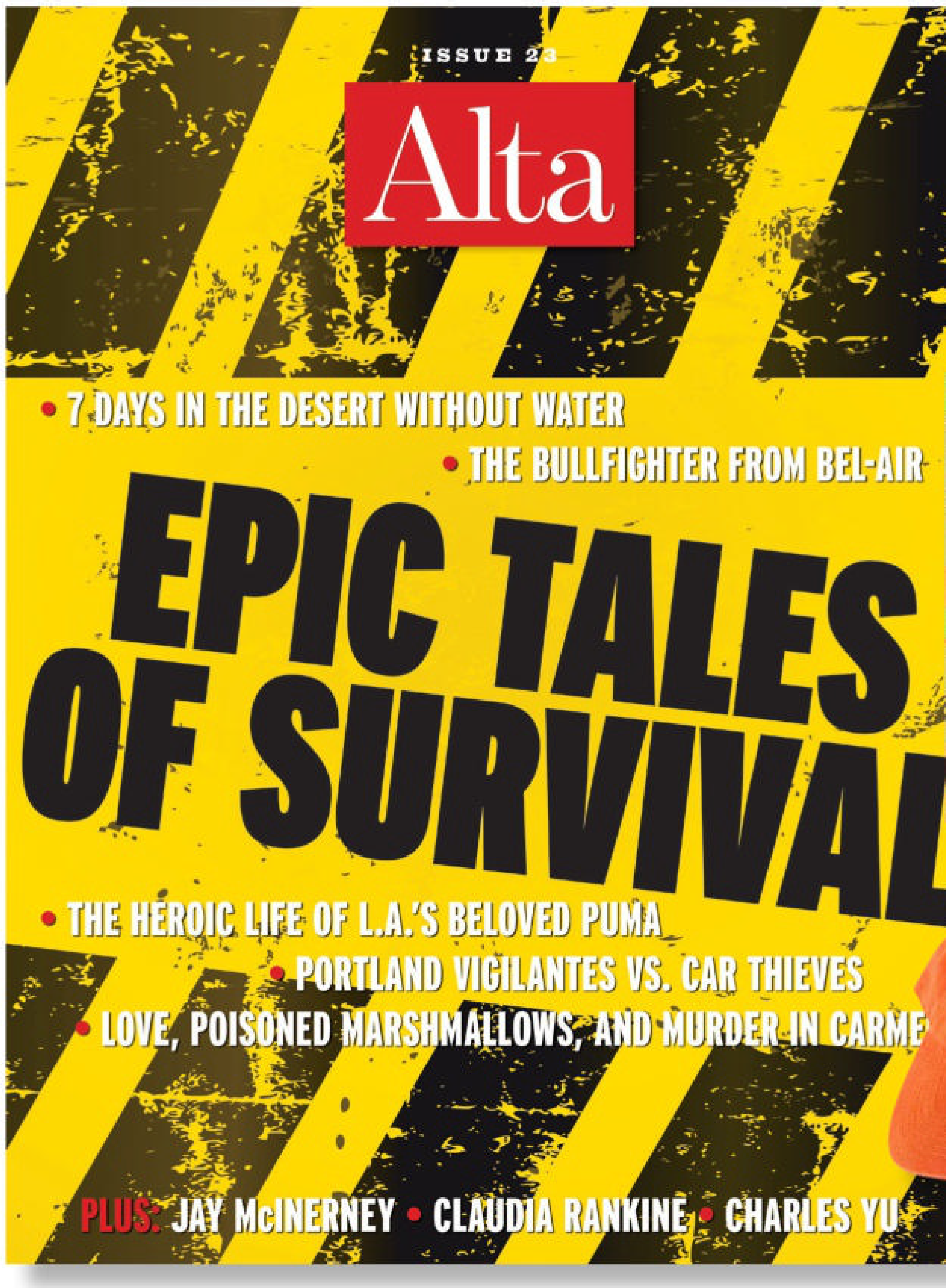
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PHOTO BY GETTY IMAGES; COVER ILLUSTRATION BY GETTY IMAGES

CONTRIBUTORS

JAY McINERNEY

"The Magic of Malibu Colony,"
page 10

Have you encountered a community of artists similar to the Malibu Colony elsewhere?
When I first visited the Hamptons, specifically the village of Sagaponack, it was something of a writers' colony. I stayed in George Plimpton's house, and my immediate neighbors were Kurt Vonnegut, John Irving, James Salter, Truman Capote, and Peter Matthiessen. But as with the Malibu Colony, the Hamptons have sadly become too expensive for all but the most successful writers and artists.

RACHEL HOWZELL HALL

"Breakdown in the Right Lane,"
page 112

Several symbols of Los Angeles show up in this short story. How did you decide on L.A. as the setting?
I'm a native Angeleno, and I love writing stories set here. This city gives you traffic when you're not ready to face "that thing." L.A. feeds you and helps you eat through your feelings. L.A. is a great city to start and stop—those extraordinary sunsets and sunrises tell you that the worst is over and the best is yet to come.

LAURA PÉREZ

"'Look Out or You'll Be Poisoned'"
illustrations, page 42

You also illustrate for the television show *Only Murders in the Building*. Have suspicious characters become your specialty?
I manage to convey an air of mystery by creating characters with a neutral aspect in which you do not really know what is happening. I do not try to specialize in a type of mysterious character. I feel more confident using some cryptic characters, people who don't really smile but you are not sure of their behavior. I feel human mind and behavior are a real mystery.

DAVID WOLMAN

"No Pity,"
page 50

You live in Hawaii, so how did you end up following a crew of stolen-vehicle vigilantes in Portland?
Last summer, a friend in Northeast Portland wrote to tell me about a guy he knew from the dog park who had this crazy tale about the theft and subsequent recovery of his white-and-green '81 Camaro, a.k.a. No Pity. Tips that tantalizing aren't too common, so I made sure to follow up. And once I had a few conversations with the personalities at the center of this story, I knew I just had to write it.

THEA MATTHEWS

"Supernova,"
page 111

Have you had other close experiences with death, and if so, how did those play into writing your poem "Supernova"?
Death, similar to birth, is a beginning, or as Lorca notes, that's when the curtains open. I have been fascinated by its reverent nature and the wonder of a return. And when I began to write poetry as a child, I began with death. I don't believe in nothingness. Writing "Supernova" grapples with mortality while demonstrating reverence, awe, and wonder.

AJAY ORONA

"The Grizzly Next Door,"
page 18

As a Californian, what was your impression of grizzly bears before writing this story?
Thanks to movies like *The Edge*, I thought that bears were bloodthirsty killers, and I was grateful that they were not in places like the High Sierra, where I enjoy hiking. In actuality, grizzly bears exhibit a variety of behavioral traits and help maintain balance in various ecosystems. Native Californians, who had cohabited with grizzlies for millennia, greatly revered them for this.

THIS ISSUE'S OTHER WRITERS, PHOTOGRAPHERS, AND ARTISTS

Caleb Lee Adams • Scott Baxter • Steve Carroll • Katya Cengel • Stanley Chow • Peter Fish • Carolyn Fong • Christina Gandolfo • Lynell George • Jules Gill-Peterson • Penni Gladstone • Melissa Golden • David Gomberg • Geoffrey Gray • Chris Gural • Kaamran Hafeez • Denise Hamilton • Monica Corcoran Harel • Perri Lynch Howard • Lynn Hsu • Kate Isenberg • Victor Juhasz • Hokyoung Kim • Jessica Klein • Christie Hemm Klok • Joy Lanzendorfer • Meredith Lawrence • Zoe Matthiessen • John Mattos • Thomas McDonell • Charlie Neuman • Claudia Rankine • James Ransome • Eugene S. Robinson • Sarah Scoles • Gregg Segal • Jim Shoenbill • Julian Smith • Mark Smith • Dustin Snipes • Erik Stenbakken • Tim Wendel • Gordon Wiltsie • Jessica Zack • Matthew Zapruder

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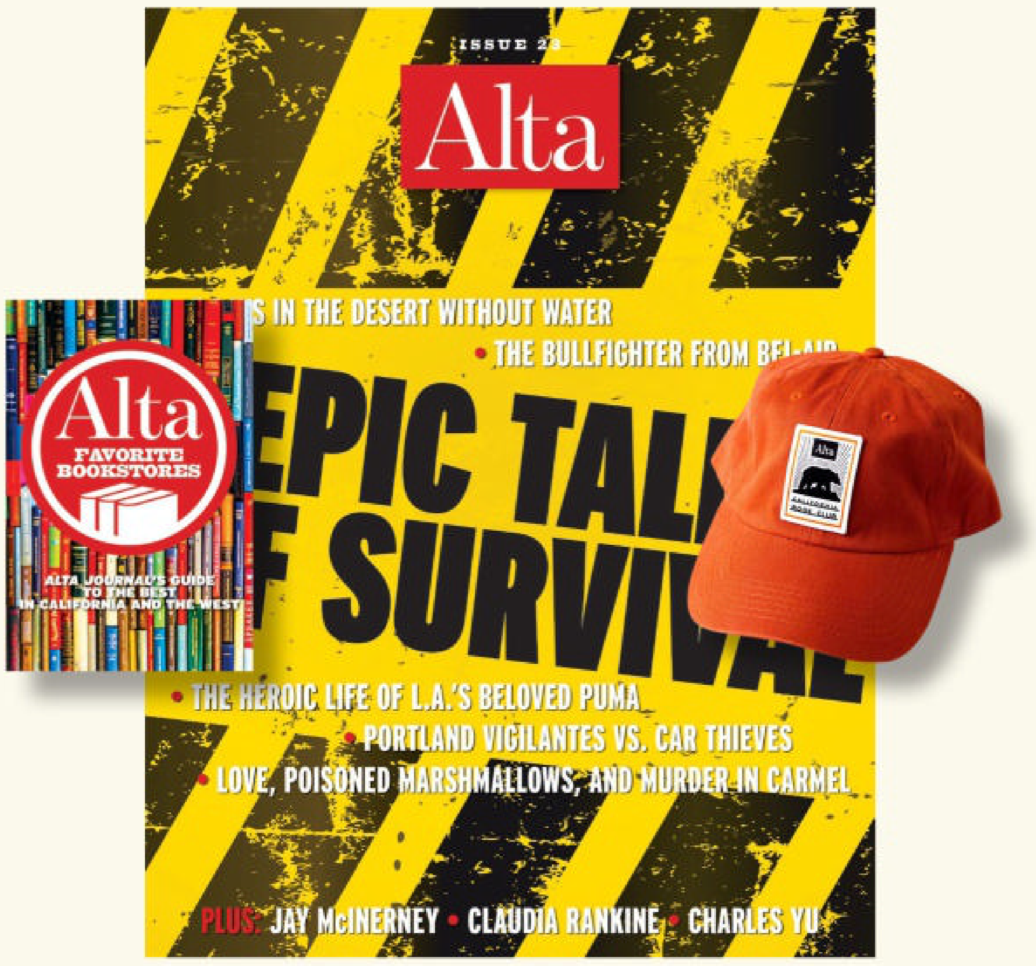
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EDITOR'S NOTE

By BLAISE ZEREGA

S for Survival

The "Soviet" soldier threw me to the ground. I was hooded, hands trussed behind my back, thighs pushed to my chest, and a leather strap slid beneath my folded knees. Two of his comrades used the thong to hoist me up, then lower me into an oil drum that was buried vertically in the earth. When I didn't fit, they pushed with their booted feet to wedge me inside the steel barrel. I sensed them placing a plywood lid above me. That was followed by the crunching sound of a spade digging into dirt and the soft thumps of soil burying me alive. It was the summer of 1985, and I was a West Point cadet who'd been ordered to Colorado's Front Range to take part in the military's Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape training. After 9/11, SERE interrogation and torture techniques were found to have been used by the CIA in Afghanistan and at Guantánamo Bay. It was lucky for me that the *S* stood for "survival."

Do you have a true tale of survival that has stuck with you? A heart-thumping yarn involving unexpected dangers—one that you read long ago, or that was recounted to you by a family member, or, God forbid, that you experienced firsthand? Think of a surfer encountering a great white shark. Or that cousin of yours waking to find an intruder in their bedroom. Or that time you forgot to check the weather and wound up on a mountaintop during a lightning storm.

For many of us, these gritty tales provide not only entertainment and escapism but also inspiration. Yes, inspiration. The stories thrill us, offering enough details and imagery to put us in the action, exploring our limits and discovering what we're capable of…from the safety of an armchair.

For this issue of *Alta Journal*, we decided to go all in on true tales of survival—though admittedly, some of the stories are so wild, it's hard to believe they're fact. You'll want to fasten your seat belt for "No Pity," a fast-paced drama by David Wolman. Picture the dystopian film *Mad Max: Fury Road* set in present-day Portland. A ragtag band of citizens fed up with rampant car thefts use drones, social media, and human surveillance to take back stolen vehicles, sometimes from violent thieves. They can move faster than the police and don't depend on search warrants.

Tales of peril may also arise when we pursue our dreams. In 1977, a young woman from Los Angeles made a bold attempt to become modern-day Spain's first matadora de toros. As reported by Geoffrey Gray, "The Bullfighter Draws Her Sword" describes how one afternoon in Móstoles, Honey Anne Haskin gave the performance of a lifetime, but was unable to advance her career. It wasn't until 1996 that bullfighting anointed its first matadora in Europe.

Troubles arrive, too, during the pursuit of love. In "'Look Out or You'll Be Poisoned,'" Joy Lanzendorfer transports us to the Carmel, California, of 1914, during an era when the fledgling coastal town attracted many writers and artists: George Sterling, Jack London, Mary Austin, William Merritt Chase, to name a few. Much like an Agatha Christie whodunit, the story begins with a man biting into a marshmallow laced with strychnine. He becomes violently ill but later recovers. A hunt for the would-be killer ensues, and a murder takes place.

Next, you may travel from a fabled artist colony to an unforgiving landscape. In "'Agua, Agua,'" you'll meet prospector Pablo Valencia, who in 1905 survived a week without water in the Sonoran Desert, and the high school teacher who set out 75 years later to trace Valencia's route and nearly succumbed to the ordeal. The anthropologist who rescued Valencia described his condition:

> *His lips had disappeared as if amputated, leaving low edges of blackened tissue; his teeth and gums projected like those of a skinned animal, but the flesh was black and dry as a hank of jerky; his nose was withered and shrunken to half its length; the nostril-lining showing black; his eyes were set in a winkless stare.*

.INAS
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© HONEY ANNE HASKIN

Honey Anne Haskin incites a bull to charge by flashing her capote.

And perhaps no one faces more threats than a wild animal in an urban setting. "P-22's Life in L.A.," by Denise Hamilton, is an autobiography of the famous mountain lion and his time in the Santa Monica Mountains. This first-person account brings to life the puma's need for wilderness, his encounters with humans, his futile quest for a mate. It ends with his tragic death last December. P-22 was more than a cougar; he represented the hope that somehow we can fix our environment enough to sustain beautiful, native creatures like him.

While our epic tales include themes of love, death, and resilience, they also feature a powerful sense of place. It's something that distinguishes the writing in *Alta*, a firm grounding in California and the West. Open this issue and you'll find a lively account of life at the Malibu Colony by novelist Jay McInerney, National Book Award winner Charles Yu on his *Interior Chinatown*, and Lynell George on the elusive Alene Lee, on whom Jack Kerouac based one of his characters in *The Subterraneans*.

Whether you go from front to back, read through in reverse, or open our publication to a random page, we hope you'll discover stories that pull you in and remind you of what a miracle it is to be alive in this most amazing region. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY STANLEY CHOW

Eugene S. Robinson found punk when the Sex Pistols hit New York like an A-bomb in 1978.

By Eugene S. Robinson • *Photos by* Carolyn Fong

A Punk's Progress

Sometimes it can take a lifetime to learn how not to throw a punch.

SFO was aflutter with student volunteers in red T-shirts, their signs held aloft announcing the name and the place and the fact that this would be the first day of our four years together at Stanford. The volunteers were all very…upbeat. Almost impossibly upbeat to my just-off-the-plane-from-New-York eyes and ears.

Speaking of ears. My left one was angled 90 degrees from my head like a wing, crusted with dried blood. Not more than 48 hours earlier, three men, and a dog, had tried to murder me. They'd only succeeded in bashing the side of my head with a broken bottle.

Now that it was stitched up, poorly, it hurt too much to wash, so I'd left it as is.

A blond, blue-eyed volunteer skipped up to me. "Are you GENE?"

"I'm EUGENE."

"Great," she chirped, figuratively and almost literally. "Welcome to Stanford!"

Let me back up. In 1980, I was headed to Stanford from New York City's Stuyvesant High School, where most of my classmates went on to East Coast Ivy League universities. Despite my best efforts, though, following a midnight showing of the Clash flick *Rude Boy*, I got swept up in a street fight that had me acting as a peacemaker until a broken bottle cored out my left ear. I knew none of the parties involved.

Does it matter that the guys I was fighting with were working-class Italian kids, the kind we used to call *cugines*? Probably not.

Certainly not when the buses the student volunteers had piled us onto pulled down Palo Alto's tony University Avenue. Designed, I'm sure, to impress, it did just that. Stanford's appeal back then was primarily aesthetic. Before the school became known as an incubator for the tech industry, the college recruiter's pitch mostly involved pictures of the campus, San Francisco, and the beach. Brooklyn it was not, which is sort of why I came.

Stanford had other appeals unknown to any recruiter I ever talked to. The Specials had just played on campus. Dead Kennedys were from San Francisco. As a kid who had been claimed by punk rock when the Ramones started making the evening news and the Sex Pistols hit New York like an A-bomb in 1978, I had half a dozen reasons to be here.

Arriving "here," though, I was unprepared for Reagan's America in the heart of the state where he first made his bones. Stanford freshmen from California—a place where the Black upper middle class exists in scattered outposts totally different from what I grew up with—had an understanding of the world that didn't expand too far beyond their parents'.

GETTY IMAGES

Robinson performing with his band Oxbow in 2008.

Young Republicans, luaus, and a general lowercase-*c* conservatism led to a steady stream of girlfriends shocked that their parents were shocked that they were dating me, which soon gave way to their not dating me.

Does it matter that the girls I was dating were white upper-middle-class kids who claimed not to see race? Probably not. Especially since the Black girls I had dated had parents who were equally chagrined to find their daughters dating a guy with a mohawk. I guess I forgot to mention that. While no big deal in New York in 1980, it was very much one at Stanford.

But the shock and awe extended well beyond the mohawk. I'd been lifting weights half my life. I'd also been an avid newspaper reader from age six, and I realized early on that the city I was growing up in was collapsing in on itself. Awash in the randomness of horror and violence that was like so much bad weather in 1970s New York, I required some sort of preparation. Mostly, it came in the form of martial arts that I'd been practicing since I was 10, whether it be boxing at the Boys' Club or karate in the basement of the church around the corner.

This and the tattoos—long before CEOs and moms were slathered in them—and my propensity for muscle cars became a comfortable carapace that I carried with me from one coast to the other.

The weather in California was better, but my concerns remained existential, mostly on account of my refusal to avoid places where people might want to kill me.

In the Bay Area, punk was giving way to hardcore, a scene I eagerly threw myself into. And California was rife with opportunities that the very closed New York scene lacked. At Stanford, I started a magazine called *The Birth of Tragedy*, after the Nietzsche tome, and made my general alienation a feature, not a bug. With each issue, I built my own cabinet of curiosities: Anton LaVey from the Church of Satan, Charles Manson, and later John Wayne Gacy, mingled with more standard subjects like Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Lydia Lunch.

While the New York scene I'd left behind was mostly disaffected art school kids who were about five years older than me, hardcore was age consistent and very much my tribe. But then, it was also not fully my tribe. New York's punk rock racism was largely performative and employed to shock. Think Sid Vicious's swastika, Patti Smith's "Rock N Roll Nigger" (which has come under woke review, and not a moment too soon). Hardcore, on the other hand, came from a more confused place.

Songs like the Adolescents' "Kids of the Black Hole" and, later, Alex Cox's film *Repo Man* captured the nihilistic zeitgeist. California was full of the Me generation's walking wounded. Baby boomers had sobered up; found crystals, Christianity, or Reagan (him

It took Robinson decades to understand that power comes from avoiding fights.

again); and forgotten that they had kids. Their kids, though, were just as likely to call the drummer in my hardcore band Whipping Boy the n-word as they were to be chased by me and beaten for it.

Call it the California Okie contingent, or the skinhead shock troops—what would eventually become the Proud Boy element had always been there, attracted by the heat of a generalized anarchy and loud noises made by other angry young men. In other words, these California kids were no more enlightened than anyone else who didn't already have an interest in being enlightened.

At my first big California hardcore show, at California Hall on Polk Street, a guy in a White Power shirt with a swastika on it sailed across the heads of the crowd to kiss me on the lips. Sometimes life gives you the perfect metaphor: In those days, I routinely found myself in the company of the most reprobate actors of any political spectrum you can imagine. Nazis? Satanists? Radicals of every kind? They were all a part of my scene.

This was a development that prompted a friend to ask me, "Why don't they hate *you*? And why do you do business with *them*?"

The latter question was simple to answer: After graduation, I ran a record store called CFY in Palo Alto and a record label of the same name while simultaneously toiling as a technical editor at the Electric Power Research Institute. Being complicit—at least passively—in their attempted "revolutions" was fine by me. Alienation was my stock in trade and seemed a particularly Californian kind of deal.

The answer to the former question? Not so simple. Maybe they worked with me because America is as aggressively dishonest about class as it tries to be honest about race. Our hunger for validation makes us desperate for associations that offer proximity to power. In a culture where power is fetishized—especially among men in their 20s—my tatted, muscled outer shell radiated strength, even if the person it was guarding was decidedly softer.

My deeper and more personal relationship with fear in the streets of New York and mosh pits across the country taught me to embrace whatever it was that made my animal brain prepare itself for any and all assaults. This was not consciously conceived by me at the time, but rather intuited. And while others might have considered my relationships with people who would seek to destroy me a purposeful test of my mettle, I never thought of it that way. The grand promise of America is always some version of "anything goes," and if that's true for anyone, why the hell not me?

Losing as many fights as I won could have been a deterrent, but it emboldened me and got me to the place every martial artist tries to get to: I understood that power comes from avoiding fights. It's an almost Buddhist idea of life beyond struggle that would've been hard for me to explain to my 18-year-old self.

"Can I see your license and registration, please?"

I'm now in my late 40s. Still living outside Stanford, father of a raft of daughters, one of whom is in the car seat in the back of my Toyota. She's singing to herself.

The cop is in his 20s. Blond, blue-eyed, clean-shaven, and about five foot nine, but I don't need to tell you that.

"Sure. It's in the trunk."

He pauses. I'm talking to my daughter. I'm not afraid of cops and want to debunk all that cop fear for her by modeling it correctly.

"License and registration, please."

"It's in the trunk," I say again.

He asks again, and it dawns on me that something is happening here. Somehow, someway, America is happening here.

"License and registration, PLEASE!"

I move to open the car door to go around to the trunk to get what he's asked for. He blocks the door with his hip and puts his hand on his service revolver.

"Don't do this," I say to him. Trying not to be heard by my daughter. And so, I explain. Slowly. While staring him in the eyes. I can see he's not really focused on me at all. Or rather, he's looking, but he's not *seeing*. He's looking *through* me. I was at the gym earlier and am wearing gym clothes, but a bespoke suit and tie—even a priest's vestment—wouldn't help him not see the boogeyman he is so clearly seeing when he looks at me.

"My WALLET is in the trunk. IN my wallet, you'll find the license and registration you keep asking me for. I cannot get it if you block the door, and so therefore you need to not ask me for that which I can't get if either of us is going to make it home today."

Amazingly, he wakes up. There's no other way to put it. He takes his hand off of his gun.

"Oh. Um. I don't need it anyway." He calls in the plates and comes back with an explanation. "You need to use your phone hands-free."

"I was putting my phone in the hands-free holder. With my hand."

He looks at me, without rancor, and I return his look, also without rancor, before breaking the gaze to see what my daughter is doing. She is watching us both.

"Well, have a nice day, sir." He slips back to his cruiser and pulls out into traffic.

"What was that about, Dad?" She's not nervous or upset because I wasn't nervous or upset.

"Absolutely nothing, kid. What do you want to eat for dinner?" ■

Eugene S. Robinson pens Look What You Made Me Do, *a Substack, and is the author of* A Walk Across Dirty Water and Straight into Murderer's Row, *forthcoming from Feral House.*

By MATTHEW ZAPRUDER

Matthew Zapruder is the author of five books of poetry. He is the editor at large at Wave Books and teaches in the creative writing MFA program at Saint Mary's College of California. He is the guest editor of The Best American Poetry 2022. *A book of prose,* Story of a Poem, *will be published by Unnamed Press in April 2023.*

As the poem says, I had never really had the serious urge to garden. Then one day I felt compelled. I was so worried about my sunflowers growing at all that I did not realize the problem was that they would get too big and not be able to support the weight of their heads. It's just a myth that sunflowers turn to follow the sun. Apparently they always face east. As a transplant to California, always in danger of falling over from the useless weight of my thoughts, I can relate. ■

Sunflower Poem

I want to fall asleep
in the middle of the afternoon

but I stand here in the yard
wondering why I planted the sunflowers
yesterday all over the garden,

knowing they would never grow
nearly tall enough to penetrate
the diurnal gloom or turn

their heads to follow their lamp,

I've never planted anything
but a voice kept saying now,

so I went out
into the yard like someone
who wants the trees

to think he has a plan
and desperately strewed the seeds,

all afternoon the leaves like green coins
above my head
in the single redwood

my neighbors planted 60 years ago
so it is still young
made that sound,

and the old skull cloud came to complain
for too long about a handsome ice storm
that promised to return last winter,

the lamp softens all things it nears

soon I will go near it because I need
to write the difficult letter that says enough,

but first the skull says it was you
who planted these sunflowers
and now they are growing

far too tall, nothing
can support that golden weight,

go slip through the chipped green gate
to ask forgiveness of the forest,

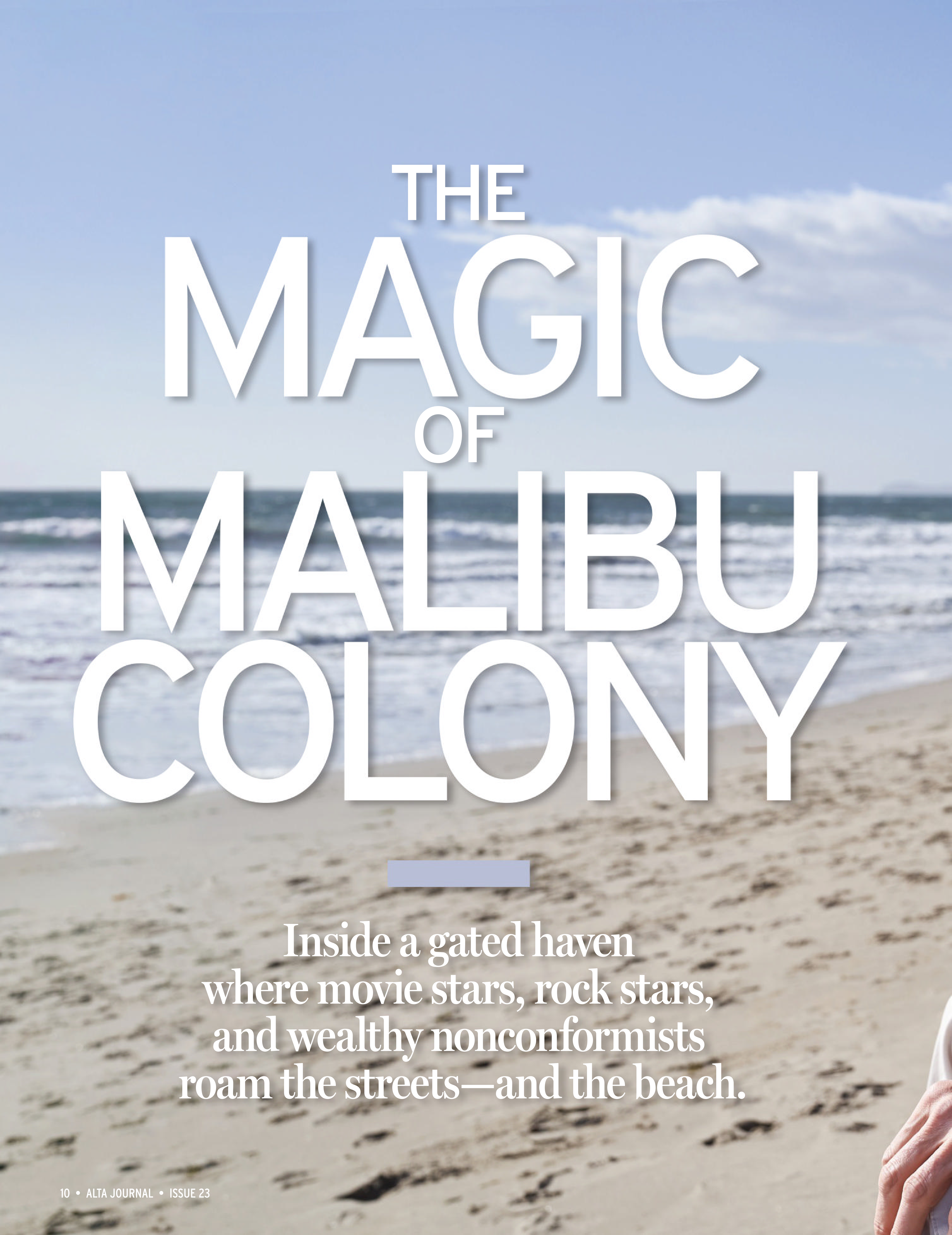
some voice will answer
I was the one who came
to you in a dream and told you

put the seeds in the black soil then forget
the deeds of your enemies

you did one
and not the other and now
those sunflowers

will grow so tall their golden heads
will fall into the earth
and unlike you they will never die.

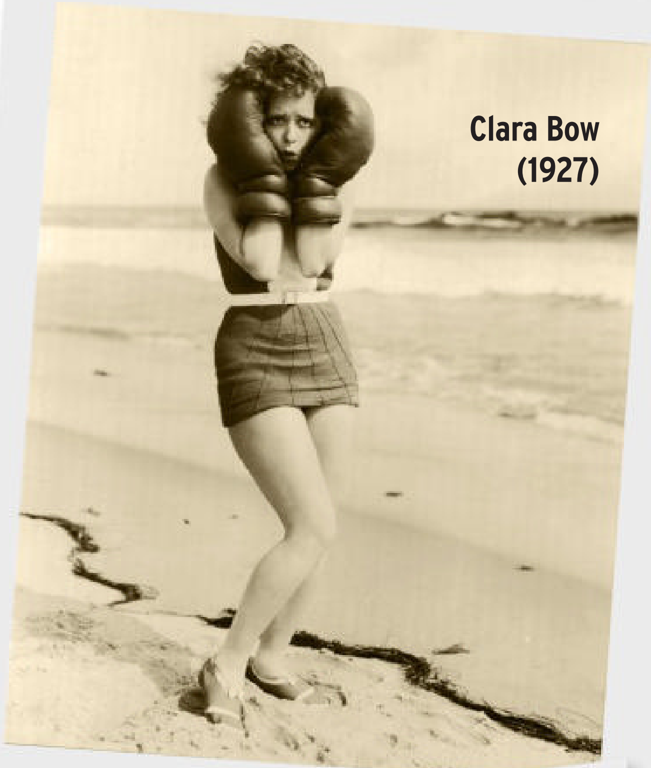
PHOTO BY GETTY IMAGES

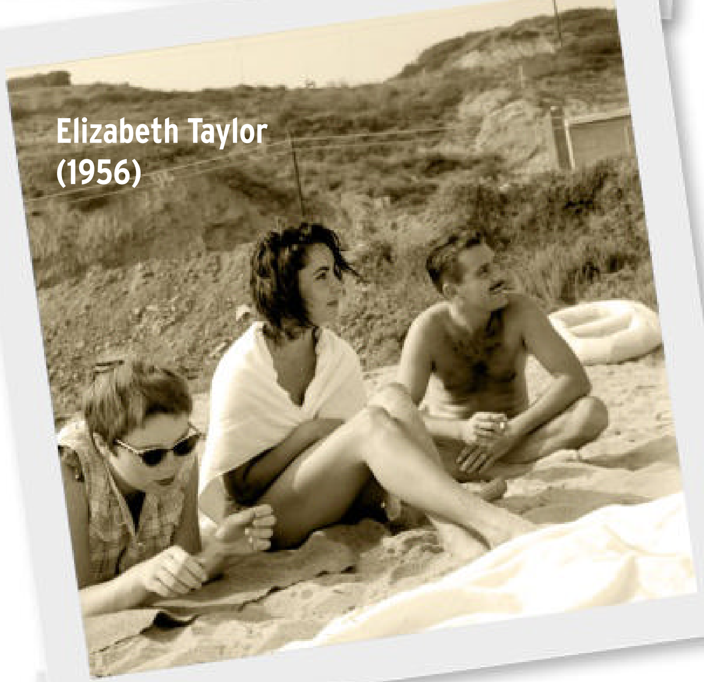


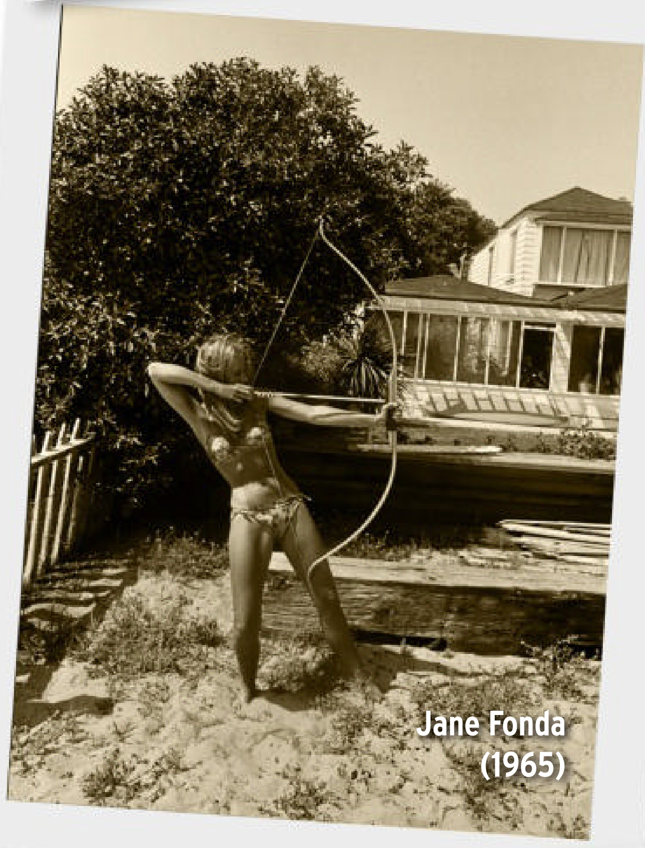
THE MAGIC OF MALIBU COLONY

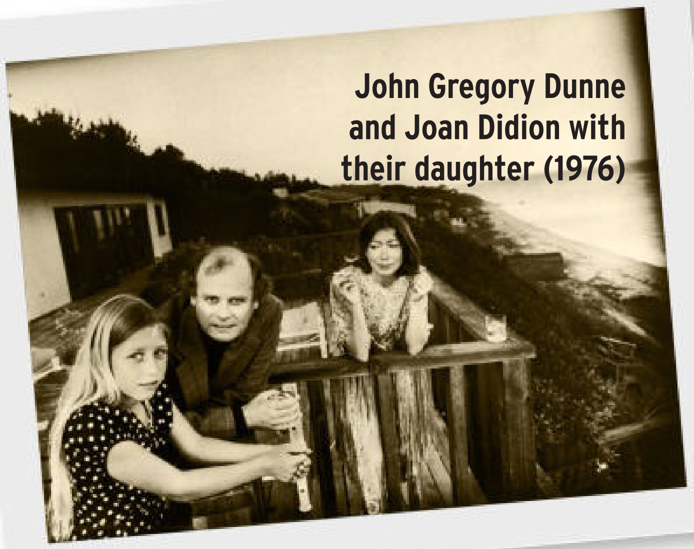
Inside a gated haven where movie stars, rock stars, and wealthy nonconformists roam the streets—and the beach.

Jay McInerney with his family's pet papillon, Suki, on the deck of his Malibu Colony house.


Clara Bow (1927)


Elizabeth Taylor (1956)


Jane Fonda (1965)


John Gregory Dunne and Joan Didion with their daughter (1976)

BEACHFRONT PROPERTY

By JAY MCINERNEY • *Photos by* GREGG SEGAL

My very first morning in residence as a homeowner in the Malibu Colony, I was out on the street with my dogs when three surfers approached from the lagoon side, wetsuits peeled to their waists, carrying their boards. I recognized some new neighbors—Edward Norton, Jonah Hill, and Flea. Norton greeted me—we live in the same building in New York, and I'd run into him during a recent stay in the Colony, while I was visiting a friend. He has a house here—an architectural landmark designed by John Lautner—as do the other two. I returned the greeting as the trio ambled down the road past Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson's house. Such was my welcome to the Colony—a mile-long stretch of houses on a south-facing beach, sealed off from the real world behind a guardhouse.

If the Colony, once known as the Malibu Movie Colony, is no longer the exclusive preserve of Hollywood's upper echelons, as it was in its founding years, nor as raffish and bohemian as it was in the 1960s and '70s, when it was the seaside outpost of the Laurel Canyon rock and roll scene, it still has more than a vestige of the communal and offbeat vibe that attracted rock stars and directors and screenwriters. It has long been the beach-community equivalent of the Chateau Marmont—which was my home away from home when I toiled as a screenwriter in the '90s—a refuge for the nonconformists and the outlaws of the entertainment world.

An investment banker acquaintance of mine, hearing that my wife and I had bought in the Colony, expressed his surprise, exclaiming that the houses there were cheek by jowl, without the luxury of privacy. Which is true. The typical house, on the ocean side, has a 30-foot-wide lot, and most of the houses are built up to the edges of the lot lines. If your neighbor has a party, you will be able to sing along to the music. If he is grilling burgers, you will smell them. And if he's out on the deck when you're on your deck, you can chat with him, as I have found myself doing more and more often as I settle in. That's always been part of the charm and the allure of the Colony—the promise of a community, the sense of living in a very exclusive village. And maybe the sense that investment bankers wouldn't want to live here. (Although several moguls of finance, like Stanley Druckenmiller, have infiltrated in recent years.)

The houses on nearby Carbon Beach, a.k.a. Billionaires Beach, sit on the very edge of the highway, whereas the Colony is a tranquil haven protected from traffic and day-trippers by a guarded entrance. And while it is probably less like a village now than at almost any time in the past, the ideal persists, even if your neighbors are absent much of the time, off at one of their other homes or skiing in Europe. The entire community, along with visiting friends, seems to converge on Malibu Colony Road for the Fourth of July and especially for Halloween, when decorations run rampant and many residents host parties.

This past Halloween was my first here, and the Colony's first since the pandemic shutdown. I'd watched the decorations go up, starting with the gatehouse, festooned with skeletons and ghosts and monsters. Early residents employed Hollywood set designers, and some of my neighbors probably did as well, judging by the quality and intricacy of the designs. My favorite was the skeleton-surfer tableau a few doors down from us. If not quite as bacchanalian as I might have hoped, given accounts of past years, the evening was still a serious revel. The Colony population was swollen for the night with friends and family—visitors needed someone to put their names at the gate. Families with kids dressed as Marvel and Disney characters took to the street before six. By eight o'clock, things had started to get raucous, with several thousand people crowding the mile of Malibu Colony Road. Adult costumes ranged from the wildly extravagant—wine merchant Richard Torin and his wife in 18th-century French court regalia complete with powdered wigs—to simple black masks. Food trucks and fun-house booths lined the street. Neighbors greeted neighbors. Celebrities like Hill and Jamie Foxx, a visitor, wandered unmolested along the street. I took it all in on my way to the home of my friends Jef Levy and Pamela Skaist-Levy, who were throwing a party. Jef's a TV and film director, Pam the cofounder of Juicy Couture. They served vintage champagne and wines with pizza to all who passed through—a procession of screenwriters, models, set designers, a sober companion and several drunks. Eventually, a group of us staggered up to the other end of the Colony in search of a party at a home being rented by Balthazar Getty, populated by well-lubricated, attractive young Gettys and their friends.

The Colony sits just west of the Malibu Lagoon, the former site of the Chumash village Humaliwo, which translates as "the surf sounds loudly." (The *Hu* wasn't stressed, and Maliwo became Malibu.) The nearly 13,000 acres that make up modern-day Malibu were part of a land grant to a Spanish settler in 1802 that was purchased by Frederick Hastings Rindge in 1891 for $10 an acre. Rindge and his wife, May, installed fences and went to great lengths to keep people away from their land.

After Frederick's death in 1905, May oversaw construction of her own railway track to prevent Southern Pacific Railroad from building a line along the coast. She also hired guards to block access to her paradise, although intrepid trespassers occasionally gained entrance by horseback at low tide. Southern Pacific's railroad was subsequently diverted inland. In 1911, May sued the State of California over its plans to build a coastal highway from Oregon to San Diego. The state sued her back. Eventually, May lost her suit in a United States Supreme Court ruling that the county had the right to use eminent domain to build a scenic highway. Construction of the Malibu segment of the Roosevelt Highway (later known as the Pacific Coast Highway) began in 1926.

By then, May was struggling to remain solvent, and she decided to start leasing land along a mile stretch of beach west of the lagoon, hoping to reclaim it after the 10-year lease period was up. Anna Q. Nilsson, a hugely popular silent-film star, was the first to sign a lease; she was followed by fellow silent star Marie Prevost, who specialized in playing flappers. Next came Raoul Walsh, a successful director with an eye patch. The community of houses on the beach became known as the Malibu Movie Colony. Many of the homes were built by Hollywood set designers on loan from the studios. Barbara Stanwyck, Dolores del Rio, Ronald Colman, Gloria Swanson, and Clara Bow were among the early tenants.

Kevin Babineau, a third-generation contractor whose father built and maintained many of the Colony's homes and passed the business on to him about 20 years ago, says that some of the houses were originally built on skids so that they could be pulled back from the beach in winter to protect them from high tides and storm surges. My own home is from 1930 and I imagine it perched on skids, ready to retreat from an encroaching surf. These early cottages seldom displayed great architectural ambition. But while the houses were ramshackle, the neighbors were celestial.

"For the first time," writes David K. Randall in his book *The King and Queen of Malibu*, "the idea that movie stars lived in their own charmed world was made literal. Stars posed in publicity photos, sunning themselves in their beachfront backyards, and gossiped about who would be able to make the transition from silent films to talkies. The public ate it up, if only because it confirmed their fantasies." Fan magazines like *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture Story* sent reporters and photographers to the Colony. A shot of Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, and Douglas Fairbanks on the tennis court in the Colony was reprinted around the world.

In 1933, James M. Cain, the great pulp novelist, wrote in *Vanity Fair*, "Whatever else may be said of Malibu, the place where the movie queens grow their sunburn, there is one thing that you have to hand it: it is probably the finest beach ever created by God." Of the screen goddesses who populated this stretch of sand, Cain wrote, "They blend in with the seascape, being in much the same key; they too are dazzling, a little wearisome, and more than a little unreal; they too have that quality, that suggestion of having stepped out of somebody's fever dream, that goes with the Pacific Ocean and no other ocean." Cain noted that in this part of Malibu, the coastline faces due south, with the result that the sun shines directly on the beach all day long, as if it were perpetually noon.

The stars and directors of talkies were plentiful among the second wave of Colony residents, to whom May Rindge started selling the properties outright as her fortunes continued to decline. The lots went for $12,000, which many considered an outrageous price at the time. ("Did somebody take these pulchritudinous suckers for a ride?" asked Cain in his article.) Lana Turner, Frank Capra, and Loretta Young were among those who moved in.

Decades later, Cary Grant took a house down the street from ex-wife Dyan Cannon after she filed a restraining order against him. Liz Taylor and Richard Burton rented in the Colony while they were married. The houses got bigger and more ambitious, constructed in a head-spinning variety of styles—desert adobe, Japanese, Bauhaus modern, Tudor, Spanish, Moorish, Cape Cod colonial—more than a few of the structures seeming to illustrate the theory that wealth and fame are no guarantors of taste.

In the '60s and '70s, rock and roll came to the Colony, the new era inaugurated by a legendary Fourth of July party that Jane Fonda and her soon-to-be husband, Roger Vadim, threw on the beach outside their house, where the Byrds played till dawn under a giant plastic tent. Warren Beatty, Jack Nicholson, Steve McQueen, Sidney Poitier, Buck Henry, Joan Didion, Dennis Hopper, and Brooke Hayward were among the guests. Some saw it as the moment when New Hollywood gave the collective finger to Old Hollywood. According to Mark Rozzo, in his recent book, *Everybody Thought We Were Crazy*, Henry Fonda approached the stage and started tugging at the pant leg of bass player Chris Hillman, begging him to turn the volume down. Hillman relayed Fonda's request to David Crosby, who said, "Fuck that," and played on. When Hillman later consulted Peter Fonda about his father's request, the younger Fonda said, "Don't pay any attention to him. He's an old man."

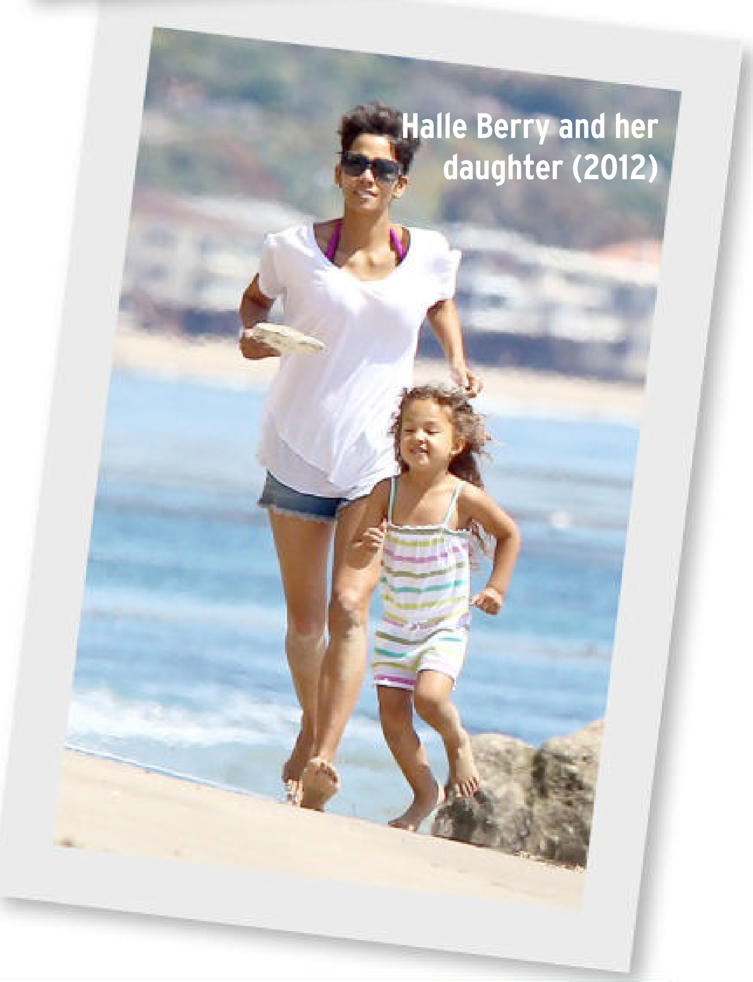
Rozzo quotes Jane Fonda as saying, "It was quite an amazing scene. There was a hippie who followed the Byrds in line at the buffet with a tie-dyed skirt and her breasts exposed, nursing a baby. Danny Kaye was behind her with his eyes popping out, and George Cukor behind *him*, kind of gagging." My next-door neighbor Paul, who grew up in the Colony, remembers sneaking into the party. "At first, we just assumed it was a Byrds cover band," he says. "Of course, we were pretty stoned. My friend snuck up to the stage and touched the drummer's leg."

My friend Griffin Dunne, the actor-director-

Ronnie Wood and Mick Jagger (1976)

Courteney Cox (2004)

Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson (2014)


Halle Berry and her daughter (2012)

PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES, DENNIS HOPPER, CARINTHIA WEST, AND ALAMY

producer, spent summers in the Colony with his parents, Ellen and Dominick Dunne, who went to big parties there rife with showbiz and literary folk and eccentrics without portfolio, including an English aristo named Sharman Douglas, who once arrived on an elephant, which she allowed the kids to ride until the elephant, maddened by the heat of the road, bolted off toward the Pacific Coast Highway. Dunne also remembers being impressed by the parade of movie stars visiting Roddy McDowall's house in the mid-'60s.

In the years that followed, more rockers infiltrated the Colony. Singer turned producer Peter Asher drew many of his musical friends there, including James Taylor and Joni Mitchell. Linda Ronstadt moved in, and the members of Led Zeppelin rented multiple houses one summer. Ronnie Wood also rented there; Mick Jagger and Keith Richards were frequent visitors. Neil Diamond bought a house, just a few doors down from the one my wife and I now own. A&M Records cofounder Jerry Moss hosted many of his famous recording artists, including Cat Stevens, who supposedly had a religious conversion after he almost drowned in the waves off the beach. A couple of decades later, rappers joined the party: Suge Knight rented in the Colony and apparently set a new high bar for loud, crazy parties. The owner of the house, Lawrence M. Longo, a Los Angeles County deputy district attorney, was fired for his handling of a 1992 assault case against Knight. The State Bar of California was not amused by the fact that Knight had signed Longo's 18-year-old daughter to a recording contract with his label, Death Row Records, not long before he took up residence in Longo's house in the Colony.

The Colony featured heavily in Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, an adaptation of Raymond Chandler's 1953 novel starring Elliott Gould, released in 1973. (The shots from the street side of the Colony are legit, but knowledgeable viewers will wonder why the party scenes on the beach show an isolated house with no near neighbors.) A few years later, the Eagles played a concert at the cul-de-sac on the western end of the Colony, in front of the big adobe house belonging to actor Larry Hagman (which is currently owned by

"Whatever else may be said of Malibu, the place where the movie queens grow their sunburn, there is one thing that you have to hand it: it is probably the finest beach ever created by God."
—James M. Cain, 1933

Sting). My friend Jef Levy was among those in attendance. He told me recently, "When I was a poor kid growing up in Culver City, my brother had a friend whose father ran Universal Pictures, and one summer they invited my brother for July 4th, and he brought me along. The Eagles were playing a concert for everyone on the street. I said to God: 'Please let me live here one day.'" Some 25 years later, Jef and Pam bought Number 56, a small cottage on the west side of the Colony with an outsize history. Director Hal Ashby used the house as his production and editing headquarters, and his friend Robert Towne sublet the place and wrote part of the script for *Chinatown* there. Barry Spikings, the producer of *The Deer Hunter*, subsequently bought the house and rented it to director Ridley Scott during the making of *Blade Runner*. (More recently, my wife and I stayed there for a couple of weeks before learning that there was a house for sale up the street, which we purchased and where we now live.) This is, as far as I can determine, a pretty typical Malibu Colony house history.

It's doubtful that there is another mile of road anywhere in the world that has hosted quite as much creative energy, as much beauty, as much fame, and as much sheer decadence as this one. I'm doing my small part to keep the creative legacy going—much of my latest novel has been written here. And I seem to have been accepted into the fraternity of surfers who take advantage of several excellent breaks off the Colony beach and the adjacent Lagoon Beach, though I was somewhat nonplussed when my neighbor Paul explained recently that Joe's Break, directly off our deck, was named for a surfer who died when he hit one of the rocks that create the distinctive wave.

Given the inevitable march of global warming, and the inexorable retreat of the beach, the future of the Colony is uncertain. And yet the demand for these tightly packed houses—including those on the land side—has never been greater. It is perhaps less bohemian here than in years past, but movie stars and rock stars still roam the beach—and surf the waves. After almost a century, the magic abides. ■

Jay McInerney is the author of eight novels, three collections of essays on wine, and a book of short stories, How It Ended. *McInerney splits his time between New York City and the Malibu Colony.*

LETTER FROM CHARLOTTESVILLE

By TIM WENDEL

The Slag Heap of History

Stonewall Jackson's statue should be melted down. Instead, the Confederate general is bound for Los Angeles.

They finally dismantled the Confederate statues on a summer Saturday morning. Shoppers were heading to Charlottesville's downtown farmers market when the crane and flatbed truck arrived to cart away the controversial memorials to Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson.

For those of us who live in this central Virginia town, a two-hour drive from Washington, D.C., the Lee and Jackson bronze statues underscore the volatility of our nation's history. And how we frequently play with fire when it comes to remembering the nation's past.

Since their removal in July 2021, the Lee and Jackson representations have taken markedly different paths. The likeness of Lee is scheduled to be melted down and used as local art (though court proceedings have put these plans on hold). The Jackson figure, however, was sold by the Charlottesville City Council to LAXART for $50,000. The nonprofit organization is collaborating with the Museum of Contemporary Art on Grand Avenue in Los Angeles on an exhibit scheduled to open in fall 2023.

LAXART director Hamza Walker is reportedly organizing an assemblage of Confederate statuary and monuments from Charlottesville; Richmond, Virginia; Baltimore; and Houston. He says the idea for such an exhibit came to him in 2015 after Dylann Roof murdered nine Black people in South Carolina. In an interview with the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Walker maintained that the Confederate icons have a "national cultural significance," and he has partnered with artist Kara Walker (no relation) and MOCA Grand senior curator Bennett Simpson to facilitate the *Monuments* exhibit.

Besides living in Charlottesville, I'm also a U.S. history buff; I've visited such Civil War battle sites as Antietam and Gettysburg and recently completed a novel set in 1864. Yes, we may be doomed to repeat the past if we don't understand it, put it in some kind of context. But that doesn't mean we are required to honor yesteryear's evil in our public spaces—in Virginia, California, or anywhere else.

Monuments to the Third Reich were destroyed after World War II. Perhaps one of the few things we did right in Iraq was to pull down the statue of Saddam Hussein. American colonists toppled a statue of King George III days after a public reading of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. No one insisted that it be resurrected decades later.

I wish the local officials here had decided to destroy the Stonewall Jackson figure, too. As in Nazi Germany, some monuments and vestiges of the past are too dangerous to be allowed to exist. Melt them down. Pave them under.

Throughout the South, Confederate statuary helped perpetuate the Lost Cause, the misguided mythology that slavery was not the primary catalyst for the Civil War. By playing up such bogus reasons as states' rights and the romanticism found in *Gone with the Wind*, the South's version of the war held sway in everything from our politics to schools to books and films. This is what happens when evil isn't ripped out at the roots.

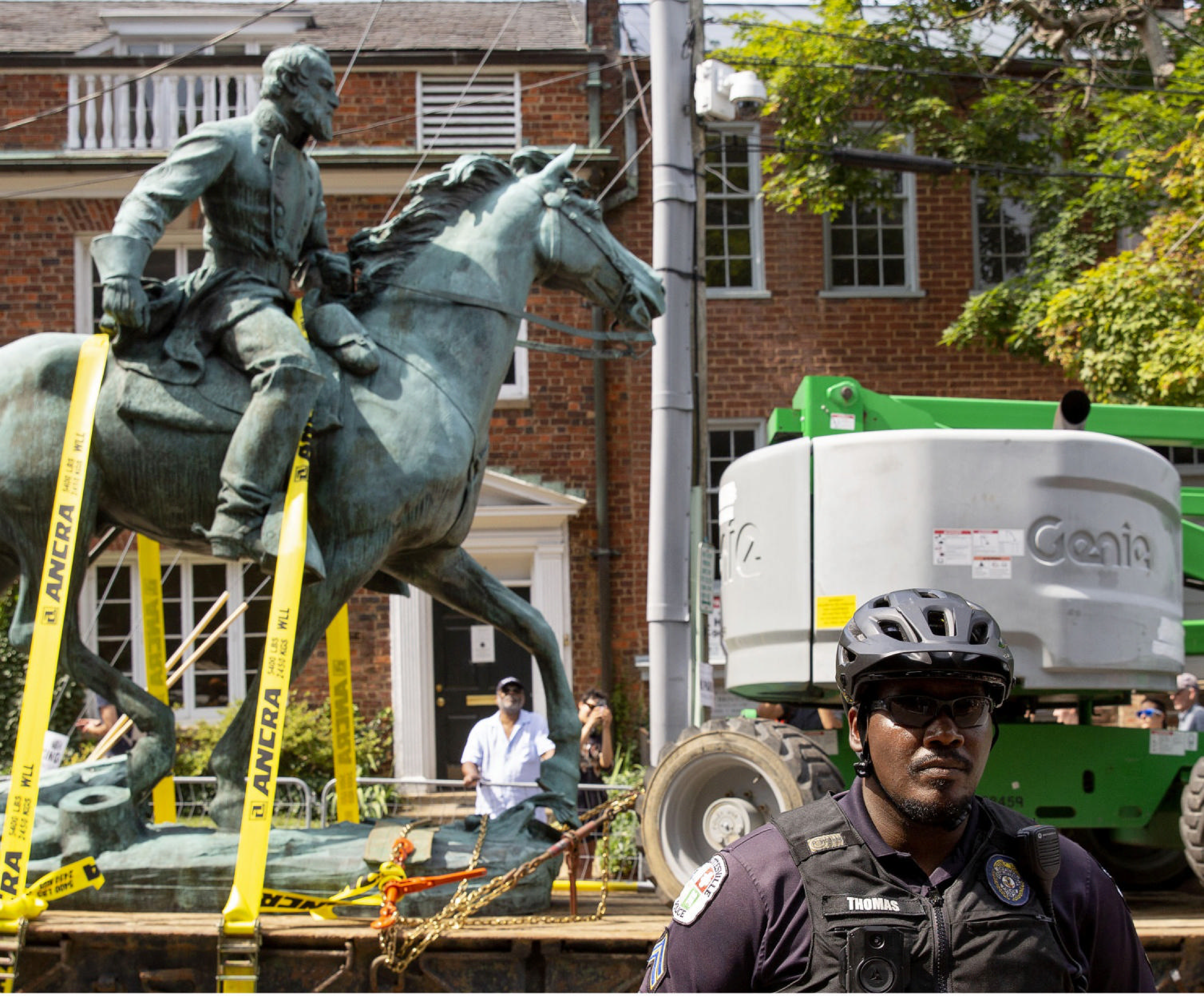
Mike Signer, Charlottesville's mayor from 2016 to 2018, told the *New York Times* that the Lee and Jackson monuments became "totems" for white nationalists. In 2017, several hundred neo-Nazis protesting the bronzes' planned removal marched on Charlottesville for the Unite the Right rally. By the time it was over, a white supremacist had run over and killed a counter-protester, and dozens were injured. Signer says the clash was "a prologue" to the insurrection in Washington on January 6, 2021.

The statues can't be gotten rid of soon enough. Enid Krieger, a past vice president of the board of the African American Teaching Fellows of Charlottesville and Albemarle, which recruits Black educators for area schools, says she has no opinion about the Jackson bronze and where it's now headed. "Just happy it's gone from Charlottesville," she texts me.

Local author and TV producer Alex-Zan was one of 12 Black children who desegregated Charlottesville public schools in 1959. He, too, is elated to see the Civil War monuments taken down and the controversy surrounding them over, at least locally. "We have more pressing issues than those statues," he says. "Things like housing, safety, education—trying to bring our communities together."

Only three blocks separate the parks in which the Lee and Jackson figures once stood. Both were commissioned by a Charlottesville graduate of the University of Virginia a century ago and unveiled at reunions of Confederate soldiers in the 1920s. Yet the statues were removed thanks to a current UVA student. In March 2016, Zyahna Bryant, then a ninth grader in Charlottesville, started a petition calling for the removal of the Lee casting and the renaming of the park where the monument to the Lost Cause stood. In considering her petition, the city council decided to also remove the nearby Jackson statue and rename the grounds where both stood. Since the bronzes were carted away, their granite pedestals have been dismantled too. Everything has been taken down to ground level, and grass now grows in its place.

At dusk, one can linger in the open area near the county courthouse, where Jackson



PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES

A statue of Confederate general Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson in Charlottesville, Virginia, was taken to storage on July 10, 2021. The bronze will be part of an upcoming art exhibit in Los Angeles. Left: People watched as the statue of Jackson was removed from Charlottesville's Court Square park.

was once portrayed astride an advancing steed. The rush hour traffic makes its way down East Jefferson Street, and a few blocks over, the restaurants on the pedestrian mall are crowded with patrons.

"Good riddance," the breeze whispers. "But Los Angeles, you're playing with fire." ■

Tim Wendel is the author of 14 books, including Summer of '68: The Season That Changed Baseball—and America—Forever, Castro's Curveball, *and* Cancer Crossings: A Brother, His Doctors, and the Quest for a Cure to Childhood Leukemia. *His novel* Escape from Castro's Cuba *was a 2022 Next Generation Indie Book Award finalist.*

REVENANT

By Ajay Orona • *Photos by* Gordon Wiltsie

The Grizzly Next Door

Researchers show that it is possible to reintroduce the iconic brown bear to California. Will people go for it?

A visitor to Yellowstone Bear World in Rexburg, Idaho, has an up close encounter with a grizzly. Californians could have similar experiences if the iconic creatures are reintroduced to the state.

PHOTO BY JOEL SARTORE

My guide recognizes the site from the highway, hidden by a spinney of shrubs and jimmyweed. We pull over and climb out of the dust-covered SUV. We have been traveling for two hours, searching for this location in Los Osos, near Morro Bay on California's Central Coast. Across the road, a gust of wind escapes from the pygmy oaks in the Elfin Forest, cooling us with its breath. Turkey vultures circle above, anticipating death in the morning.

We shield our eyes from the sun and step forward, heels over gravel. Peter Alagona, a professor of environmental studies and history at UC Santa Barbara, extends his hand toward the southeast. "You probably would not have imagined it to look like this, but this is where Spanish colonists first encountered grizzly bears," he says. Ahead of us, Los Osos Creek meanders through yellowing hills before muddying into marshland. The terrain evokes the bucolic paintings of early California, in which large predators hardly ever made an appearance.

Then I see it, about 70 yards away, hiding in plain sight: a grizzly bear on all fours.

It jars me. Then my eyes adjust—it's just a monument, not the real thing. Painted a reddish-taupe color, the concrete grizzly blends in with the muted colors of the brush, making it hard to spot despite its size. Hunched toward the earth, it peers up with a grave, lifelike expression, as if warning us to keep a distance.

"The statue marks the spot, more or less, where the first grizzly was slain by Europeans in 1769," Alagona says. The scene is easy to reproduce in the theater of the mind: the bucking, neighing horses, the shouts of Gaspar de Portolá's expedition party, the muskets fired. "After the bruin was shot nine times and killed," he continues, "the expedition smoked its meat and feasted on it."

A year later, the mission at Monterey was founded, but it remained dependent on supplies from Mexico. In one instance, a shipment was delayed, so Junípero Serra, the founder of the California missions, dispatched Don Pedro Fages, who would later become the fifth governor of California, to return to the area where his countrymen had killed their first grizzly. Fages returned with 9,000 pounds of jerked meat taken from 30 grizzlies.

The slaughter was a grim sign of things to come. Over the next 150 years, Spanish-Mexican rancheros, fortune seekers, farmers, and trophy hunters killed grizzlies at alarming rates, at times in terribly cruel ways, such as using steel traps designed to dig deeper into a bear's bones as it struggled to break free. The last grizzly bear in Southern California was killed in 1916 after being caught in such a trap, one that was weighed down with a 50-pound log. The female grizzly dragged the trap and log for half a mile, into the hills; when she was discovered the next day, she was still alive, and suffering. By 1924, the California grizzly (*Ursus arctos californicus*), a brown bear subspecies, was extirpated.

Peter Alagona, a professor of environmental studies and history at UC Santa Barbara, beside a sculpture in Los Osos that marks the site of the first encounter between Spanish colonizers and a California grizzly. In 1769, a hunting party from Gaspar de Portolá's expedition shot the bruin nine times, killing it and starting the path to the bears' eventual extirpation in 1924.

White settlers did not start to revere the California grizzly—for its size, its strength, its fierce determination to survive—until its population was decimated. The fate of the bear had been sealed, the majestic bruin reduced to an insignia on a flag.

Next to the Los Osos statue, Alagona recounts this history in a hushed tone, squinting at the hills as if grizzlies, or their spirits, still roamed in them. While he laments the bears' demise, he situates it within a much larger story, one in which California grizzlies inhabited the state for thousands of years—and, if the right steps are taken, may do so again.

Alagona leads a team that has included nearly 50 archaeologists, wildlife biologists, ecologists, and other scientists whose aim is to promote more informed conversations about the "past and potential future of grizzly bears in California." Aptly named the California Grizzly Research Network, the multidisciplinary group plans to conclude its work in 2025. Yet Alagona believes that its findings to date, which have

identified suitable reintroduction sites and food systems, suggest that grizzly bears *could be* brought back. "Grizzly bears are like the Swiss Army knives of bears," he says with a smirk. "Drop them off in most environments and they'll survive. The bigger question is whether or not people will tolerate them."

BEAR STATE REACTION

Typically, wildlife issues cleanly divide proponents and dissenters. The issue of reintroducing the grizzly bear to California, however, is a bit more hairy. Where people can rally behind efforts to preserve the California condor or protect wild mustangs (even as the latter ravage grasslands throughout the West), Californians of all political persuasions and lifestyles are hesitant about bringing an apex predator—one that can weigh up to 900 pounds and take down a full-grown moose—to a state bursting with 40 million people. Ranchers, especially those in areas where wolves have returned, are deeply concerned about the possibility of adding grizzly bears to the mix.

"The Whaleback wolf pack up in Siskiyou County has already had six confirmed cattle kills in recent months," says Kirk Wilbur, vice president of government affairs for the California Cattlemen's Association. "The question emerges: Is cattle ranching still viable in northeastern California?"

He adds, "Urban and suburban environmentalists who will not be impacted by this are more than happy to have their rural neighbors bear the brunt of reintroduction.... If this were formally proposed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, we would strongly oppose it and leave everything on the table in terms of stopping it."

If the grizzly were to be brought back to remote areas of the state, the way Californians experience the outdoors would change on a fundamental level. Imagine hearing the huff of a grizzly bear outside your tent at night or spotting a huge brown mass moving toward you on a remote trail.

"We already have conflicts with mountain lions and livestock and humans…and now we've got wolves. To think about bringing another predator into the state that we would have to manage and come up with some program to figure out what happens when the grizzly attacks a human or kills livestock does not seem feasible for us," says Jordan Traverso, deputy director of communications, education, and outreach at the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. "With wildfires erupting throughout the state, there are enough issues to solve. Why do this now?"

It's a question that Alagona is more than keen to answer. Next year marks the 100th anniversary of the last credible grizzly bear sighting in California, and many environmentalists believe it should be commemorated with a plan from U.S. Fish and Wildlife for the bruin's return, especially now that a number of Indigenous tribes, including the Tejon and the Yurok, are considering the possibility.

Tiana Williams-Claussen, the Yurok Tribe's Wildlife Department director, says that the Yurok want to see the restoration of species that existed on their land before European contact, because these creatures played a critical role in the environment. However, the Yurok interpret their land to be in a state of imbalance at present. "An apex predator would either improve or worsen that situation," says Williams-Claussen. "It *could* be beneficial: we have more black bears than the land can support, and elders have said that Grizzly once helped keep those populations in balance. But we no longer have the abundance of deer, elk, and fish we once had; their habitats are too far degraded." She adds, "It's an interesting question, can or should this be done?"

Alagona maintains that if Indigenous tribes were to favor the idea, it would be an ethical imperative to bring back the grizzly. At its core, the notion of reintroduction involves philosophical questions about the land: To whom does it belong, and how should it be used?

While grizzly bear numbers have increased from fewer than 1,000 to more than 1,800 in the contiguous United States since they were classified as a threatened species in 1975, the remaining populations, such as those in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, are isolated, dangerously so.

"If we're serious about recovering grizzly bears, we need more populations around the West, and more connections between them so they don't fall prey to inbreeding and have a chance of adapting to a warming world," wrote Noah Greenwald in 2014 on behalf of the

Center for Biological Diversity, the Arizona-based conservation organization where he is the endangered species director. "Grizzly bears are one of the true icons of the American West, yet today they live in a paltry 4 percent of the lands where they used to roam."

Despite their threatened status, the federal government has tried to strip protections from grizzlies on several occasions, such as an attempt in 2012 to allow seasonal hunting of the bears. The pushback from wildlife advocates was fierce, including a lawsuit the Center for Biological Diversity brought against U.S. Fish and Wildlife that petitioned for the grizzly bear to be returned to areas within its historical range.

The attempts to remove the grizzly's threatened designation, the ensuing lawsuit, and the overall hoopla have generated public interest in reintroduction efforts, especially in California. Seven years after the lawsuit was filed, the federal government issued a report acknowledging that the High Sierra would provide suitable habitat for grizzly bears but stating that it would not begin the reintroduction process because the grizzlies in California would be isolated from other populations across the West—the very point that Greenwald raised years ago about the Yellowstone grizzlies.

The Center for Biological Diversity's effort to have the grizzly bear's historical range recognized by the federal government has seemingly reached a stalemate, but the reality is that U.S. Fish and Wildlife could decide at any time to green-light a reintroduction project. If it did, the groundwork conducted by Alagona and the California Grizzly Research Network would most likely make California among the federal government's first testing sites. "California is actually a wildlife-friendly state. If there were a state to reintroduce grizzlies, it would be the one," says Greenwald.

Until then, however, scientists must address the "reintroduction gap."

COHABITATING WITH CARNIVORES

Once we leave the statue in Los Osos, Alagona drives five miles up the coast toward Morro Bay. While Portolá journeyed via land from Baja to California, many of his soldiers sailed to Morro Bay and then marched south to join his ranks. We are roughly following, albeit in reverse order, the path that these conquistadores traveled. Our plan is to observe a few areas, such as the hills east of Los Osos and Sedgwick Reserve, where the ecosystems have remained similar to what the Spanish encountered. It's not something easily done elsewhere in the state.

Since Portolá's expedition, the majority of California's landscapes have been dramatically altered. While the California condor was extinct in the wild for 5 years, nearly 100 years—too much time, in the eyes of some researchers—have passed for the grizzly. The conceptual distance between current social and physical conditions and ones that are suitable for grizzlies to reinhabit, what scientists dub the reintroduction gap, is quite wide. This leaves reintroduction proponents with the complex task of determining whether suitable homes for grizzlies still exist and, if so, how to rank them.

Rachel Mazur, who oversaw the bear management program in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks for nine years, discounts the entire reintroduction project. In the first chapter of her book *Speaking of Bears: The Bear Crisis and a Tale of Rewilding from Yosemite, Sequoia, and Other National Parks*, widely considered an essential work on black bear stewardship, she writes frankly about grizzly bears coming back to the Golden State: "The political reality is that people are afraid of grizzlies, and the ecological reality is that the habitat has been converted to agriculture and cities, including Fresno and Merced."

In the SUV, Alagona concedes that Mazur may have a point, but California is a massive state. "We have plenty of space," he says. "The question is whether or not we want them. And it is a choice."

When considering a potential reintroduction site, the California Grizzly Research Network looks for blocks of unbroken wilderness (owing to the grizzly's proclivity to wander and the dangers of inbreeding), abundant food resources, and areas with little human traffic. The High Sierra, the mountain range containing Yosemite and Kings Canyon National Parks; the Shasta Cascade, in the state's northeastern corner; the Trinity Alps, the second-largest wilderness area in California; and the Los Padres National Forest, just east of Santa Barbara, all meet such qualifications.

Ironically, Alagona looks to the land of the colonizers—Europe—as a model for human–brown bear coexistence. The continent is only slightly larger than the Lower 48, yet 17,000 brown bears roam there, more than nine times as many as in the contiguous United States. And it's not only bears that are thriving in the Old World. Wolves, lynx, and wolverines are rebounding in impressive numbers from the Fennoscandian peninsula to the Mediterranean. A 2014 article in *Science* reveals that such conservation success is a result not of setting aside swaths of land for animals (Europe has very limited space to devote to wilderness and more than twice the population of the United States) but of a changing mindset toward cohabitating with large carnivores. Europeans are increasingly *more open* to sharing spaces with bears and other predators; they recognize the integral roles these creatures play in various ecosystems and how, in the long run, animal biodiversity benefits humans as well.

One key difference, however, is that while Europe may have brown bears, the *grizzly bear* subspecies lives only in North America, and the California grizzly, now extinct, lived only in the Golden State. If the brown bruins are to return to California, they must be brought from elsewhere in the country.

With wild grizzlies living only in Alaska, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and western Canada, the options are limited and must be weighed carefully, as the grizzlies in each region have evolved over millennia to exhibit unique behaviors and seek specific foods. Determining which grizzly would adapt best to California requires extensive multifaceted research, not least of which is figuring out what constituted the California grizzly's diet.

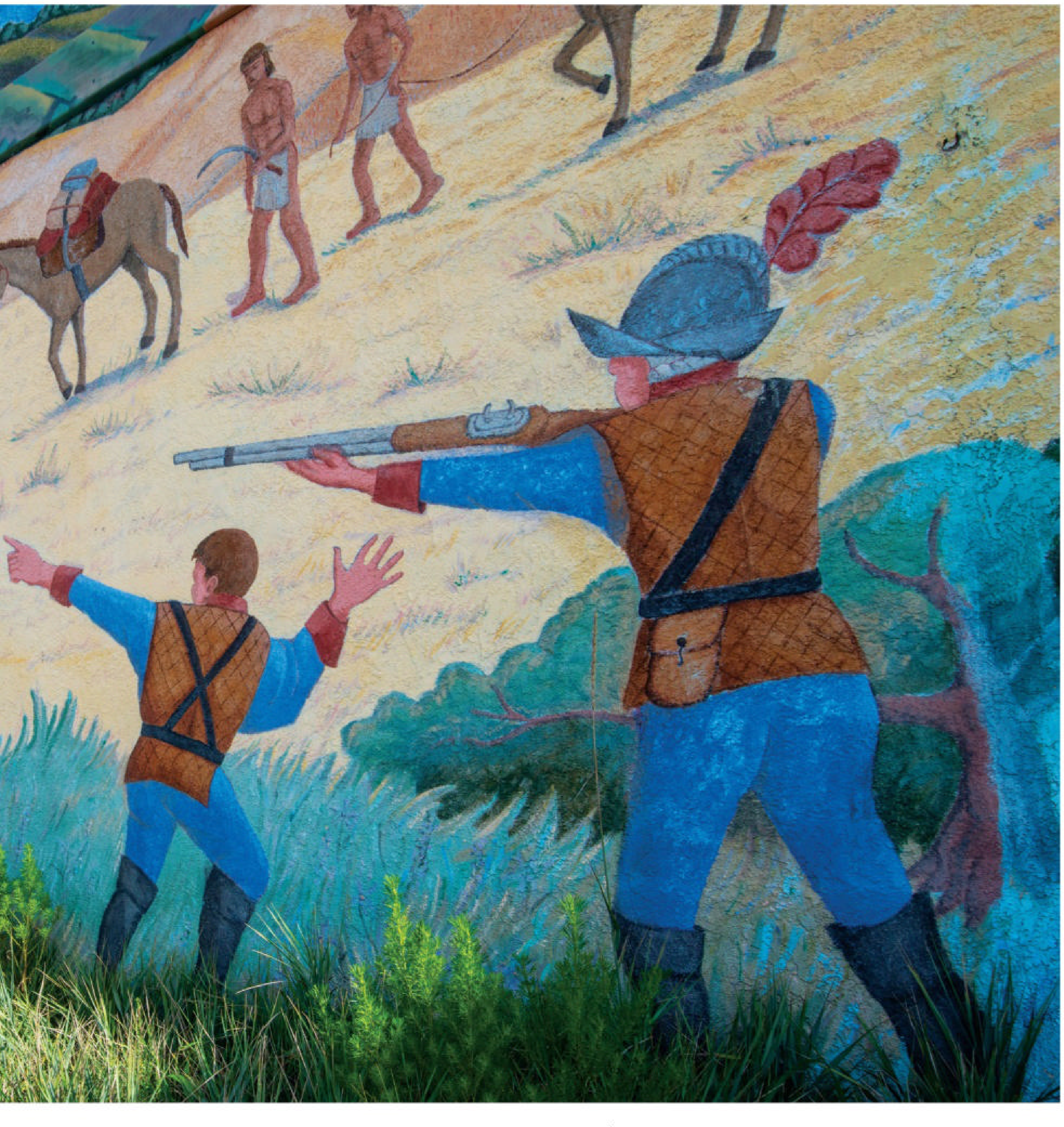
THE FOSSIL RECORD ROARS

Months before the road trip to Morro Bay, I visit the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles. Fog floats over Wilshire Boulevard. It's an unusually cold morning, even for January. As I take in the drama of the site's iconic mastodon statues crying out to their companion mired in the Lake Pit, Alexis Mychajliw, a paleontologist, conservation biologist, and assistant professor at Middlebury College as well as a research associate with the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County, informs me that I'm looking at a former mining site that has since filled with rain, mud, and asphalt. "It's more like a dirty lake than anything else," she says. "But don't worry. We'll get to observe some of the real tar pits."

I turn to face the museum behind us, a megalithic-looking compound with a frieze depicting prehistoric animals snarling, eating, and chasing one another. Mychajliw speaks in a relaxed voice, enunciating every syllable as she walks toward the open green lawns that lead away from the lake and the museum: "I want you to see the pits outside; then we'll visit the Fossil Lab inside the museum." Researchers have excavated the remains of around 2,500 saber-toothed cats and more than 3,600 dire wolves from the local pits, but they have lifted only a handful of bears from the gloopy earth. The reason, I guess somewhat correctly, is that most bears were too clever to get caught. "Maybe they also weren't scavenging as much as we think something like the dire wolf and saber-toothed cat that was attracted to those sites did," Mychajliw says.

We tread through damp grass until we reach Pit 10, which looks like a small pond caked in muck and leaves. Below this layer, its black sludge swallowed a slew of exotic beasts, including a California grizzly that was discovered in 1914. An examination of the bones and later radiocarbon dating indicated that the bear was a small female that lived around 6,000 years ago. What caused the female grizzly to risk entering the tar is unknown: it could have been a desperate act to retrieve food or to rescue a cub, but the bones have yet to tell that part of the story. What they do reveal, however, is what the California grizzly ate.

I follow Mychajliw back toward the museum and into the Fossil Lab, where scientists hunch over microscopes and stride from desk to desk with specimens in gloved hands. It feels like a scene from *Jurassic Park* except that some of the creatures being examined still exist. Mychajliw calls me over to a large back room with shelves full of fossils and other specimens. She picks up the skull of the California grizzly bear we were discussing and, surprisingly, lets me hold it. The side of the skull reads, in white print, "Pit 10."



A mural in Los Osos depicts the first sighting and killing of a California grizzly by members of the Gaspar de Portolá expedition. The Spanish colonizers feasted on the slain animal.

Mychajliw explains that she is working on a complex biochemical analysis of the bears' bones to learn about their diets. "Essentially, you are what you eat," she quips.

Gleaning such knowledge is crucial for deducing which habitats might support California grizzlies today. Findings by Mychajliw and her team so far indicate that California grizzlies, whose bones were sampled from across the state and from varied climates, mostly ate an herbivorous diet: roots, shoots, berries, and other vegetation as well as copious amounts of acorns. Grizzlies at the northern end of California feasted on more salmon and trout than those farther south; at higher elevations, the bears tended to feed on more carrion.

The researchers have discovered that the California grizzly increased its meat consumption after the Spanish arrival but not enough to significantly alter its nutritional intake. The slight change appears to have been the bruin's way of adapting, not a mark of its genetic expression. As its habitat was transformed into farms, and as feral pigs—parting gifts from the Spanish—destroyed oak groves through excessive rooting that decimated the once-abundant acorn supply, the grizzly augmented its diet.

Yet the sizes of these grizzlies were consistent over time, which indicates that the bears were not hypercarnivorous, as historical reports often maintained. If they had eaten as much livestock as was claimed (in one account, a grizzly was purported to have killed 200 sheep in one flock), California grizzlies would have been *much* larger, something akin to the Kodiak bears of Alaska. Instead, California grizzlies were comparable in bulk to their largely herbivorous Wyoming cousins.

It's highly possible, then—in the event that U.S. Fish and Wildlife includes California in its updated recovery plan—that a sleuth of Yellowstone grizzlies could land a one-way ticket to the West Coast. And it wouldn't be the first time bears were reestablished in the state.

Consider that 35,000 black bears live in California, the most of any contiguous state. Yet the bruins spotted on Big Bear hiking trips or making headlines for splashing into families' pools in Pasadena are not exactly native to Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties. Black bears existed in the region thousands of years ago, but for unknown reasons, they died off before humans arrived.

According to a fish and game journal published in 1935, the president of the California Fish and Game Commission put in a request for some of Yosemite's black bears. Since the park had a surplus at the time, 28 of them were translocated to the Greater Los Angeles area, where they have since thrived and multiplied. It was a *reintroduction*.

A SACRED KINSHIP

Five months after visiting the La Brea Tar Pits, I travel to Yosemite National Park with *The Sacred Paw*, Paul Shepard and Barry Sanders's exhaustive book about bears in nature and myth. The name Yosemite is a derivative of the Ahwahneechee word *uzumati*, which signifies "grizzly bear." Both the Indigenous group and the bears are absent from here.

Devlin Gandy, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and a PhD candidate in archaeology at the University of Cambridge, sees a connection in their disappearances: "I really see the loss of the California grizzly as just another extension of genocide, spreading into the ecosystem."

Gandy specializes in paleoenvironmental genomics, a field complementary to paleontology that analyzes ancient DNA to construct accurate renderings of past environments and societies. He is preparing for his most ambitious project to date: a yearslong study with the California Grizzly Research Network that seeks to help California tribes regain ecological, cultural, and traditional knowledge bases that may have been affected by or lost to colonization.

Gandy believes that the grizzly could be a key to unlocking collective memories for the tribes that live in areas of California where the bears once roamed. "We're still in the initial stages of this project, so we're clarifying what working with our tribal partners will look like and what they will want from this collaboration," Gandy says over Zoom.

Participating tribes will have the opportunity to examine what the bear still means to them and how its return could help them better understand their land. For instance, in arboreal settings, grizzlies cleared debris to create meadows and make paths in the forest, which in turn mitigated the destruction from nature-caused fires; in more arid or desert areas, the bears dug for water during droughts, creating arroyos that revitalized plants and sustained other wildlife; and, of course, they dispersed seeds through their scat, increasing plant diversity.

Because of these ecological benefits, and others that have yet to be rediscovered, many California tribes consider the bears to be teachers or land ambassadors; some see them as reincarnated forms of their grandparents. Gandy explains that speaking about the relationships between the California grizzly and Indigenous people in past tense is a bit of a misreading of how Natives view the bear: "For a lot of the tribes, the bear is still alive. It may not be physically here, but it still spiritually is alive. It's part of their daily prayers. It's part of their culture. It's an omnipresent being whether or not it's physically here."

The most tangible demonstrations of this belief are the prayers that California tribal elders, and a growing number of people from younger generations, still offer to the grizzly. Gandy politely declines to say which tribes recite the chants as he does not have their consent to do so. However, non–tribal members can witness the Tachi Yokut Tribe's ceremonies in which a handful of individuals are chosen to dress as grizzlies and dance before their communities.

"Bringing the bears back is truly an aspect of healing," Gandy says. "It's a form of healing for the land and its people."

Devlin Gandy, a Cherokee Nation citizen who is working with the California Grizzly Research Network, gathers acorns near Los Osos. The nuts were a primary food source of the state's brown bears.

BEAR IN MIND

Back on the Central Coast, Alagona and I leave Morro Bay and head south toward the Los Padres National Forest, making a quick detour at Sedgwick Reserve, in the San Rafael Mountains. Managed by UC Santa Barbara, Sedgwick is a 5,896-acre nature reserve and a site where the California Grizzly Research Network has conducted some of its experiments. I want to see a bit of the landscape and flora that were used in the group's research, so we decide to hike through an oak savanna. A graduate student we meet at the research facility tells us that a mountain lion was spotted the day before at the water hole where we're headed. Alagona seems unfazed, so we press on.

I keep my eyes peeled on the hills, but my mind circles back to a gnawing problem: if grizzlies return to California, it will be only a matter of time before a human-bear conflict occurs. Going to Yellowstone and encountering a grizzly is very different from living in an area where the bears are being reintroduced. It's highly possible that someone will get maimed or lose their life.

Alagona acknowledges right away that a grizzly bear attack could happen, but he explains that if outdoors enthusiasts give the bruins space, store their food responsibly, and hike in groups, the brown bears will leave them alone. Appearing somewhat unsatisfied with his answer, he adds, "We tend to think that the outdoors exist purely for our recreation. The reality is that we share this planet with other species, and none of its environments, especially wilderness areas, were meant to be safe. The national parks were not made to protect us—they were meant to protect wilderness and animals from us."

THE SPIRIT OF THE GRIZZLY

Back on the road, Alagona points the SUV in the direction of our final destination: a mountain lookout above the Los Padres National Forest. In the stretch of nine hours, we have visited the site of the first encounter between Europeans and grizzly bears, traced a portion of Portolá's land expedition, and hiked through an area similar to what the grizzly bear may lord over if it returns.

An hour after we leave Sedgwick, the sides of the mountains turn golden under the fat sinking sun. The hum of the engine makes me want to doze off, but Alagona perks up as we inch closer to Los Padres. Out of the four sites that the California Grizzly Research Network is considering for reintroduction—the High Sierra, the Shasta Cascade, the Trinity Alps, and Los Padres—the last is Alagona's favorite. Los Padres is a vast wilderness area, he says, more than twice the size of Yosemite. It contains everything in terrain and resources that the grizzlies would need to survive, including incredibly diverse plant life.

One big unknown is how the Los Padres climate—not nearly as cold as Wyoming's—would affect the hibernations of reintroduced grizzlies. Warmer winters would certainly equate to shorter hibernations, but that is not to say the change would necessarily be negative. Brown bears in parts of Alaska hibernate for nearly seven months; black bears in Mexico do not go into full hibernation. Yet both thrive in their environments. The only way to know for certain how grizzlies would acclimate is for them to set their paws in California.

Alagona has no doubt that grizzlies would do well with either normal or short hibernations: they've survived other environmental regime transformations. "Brown bears essentially came to California with us, with humans, around the end of the Pleistocene, or the last Ice Age," he says. "They could have also come early during the Holocene, which means they would have shared environments in Eurasia with us for a long time and adapted to varying climates. The short-faced bear reigned in California during the last Ice Age, but the grizzly bear endured with us and then became the dominant bear in California—until very recently."

He taps his fingers on the steering wheel as if tallying the 99 years that have passed since its extinction. "The story of brown bears in California is really the story of people in California."

I roll down the window and let the fresh mountain air rush inside. It's humbling to think of how long brown bears shared habitats with humans even before crossing into this continent, even before evolving into a distinct subspecies and becoming grizzlies. In each epoch, humans would have interacted with them, weaving their experiences into the grander story of man and bruin. It's regrettable that this tale ended in California before today's generations could contribute to it.

Attitudes toward wildlife are changing, however, and not just in California but across the country. President Joe Biden's America the Beautiful initiative aims to conserve 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030, which has earned it the tag "the 30x30 initiative." The multipronged undertaking was written "to conserve, connect, and restore the lands, waters, and wildlife" of the United States while soliciting the help of tribal nations in guiding the endeavor, signifying a profound shift in perspective on the land and whom it belongs to. Then there's American Prairie, a project that seeks to preserve the Northern Great Plains of Montana by connecting more than 3 million acres of private and public land in a vast unbroken chain of wilderness. So far, American Prairie includes more than 450,000 acres. If authorized, the reintroduction of grizzlies to California might also set the stage for other conservation measures, especially the plan to restore jaguars to the American Southwest.

"The two best reasons for bringing back the grizzly is that the natural world is in a state of systemic collapse, and we need to be doing everything to restore and shore up wildlife populations and ecosystems while we still can," Alagona says. "The second is that the destruction of the grizzly was really a war waged against native California and Native Californians. This means that no program of social justice for the crimes of the past will ever be complete until we all reckon with the destruction of nature in general and bears in particular."

As we're driving along East Camino Cielo, Alagona rolls the SUV to a stop yards away from a bluff, and we're met with the view of an opposing mountainside. Clambering out of the vehicle, I move toward the edge of the crag. The ravine below, which is part of the upper Santa Ynez River valley, runs northeast into the heart of the Los Padres backcountry in a series of folds, like fat wrinkles on the back of a dog's neck.

Wind surges from beneath and offers the sharp, minty smell of sage. Across the gorge, lush with chaparral, pines, and herbaceous vegetation, the mountain rises from shadows to reveal a craggy face glimmering with emerald-looking streaks. Closer to us, the berries of manzanita and the leaves of oak trees are visible, foods for the California grizzly bear of the past, and maybe of the future.

Reintroduction could depend on the ability of bears like this Yellowstone grizzly to adapt to California.

I recall Mychajliw telling me, "The resources *are* available for grizzlies to thrive in the state."

Alagona's claim that the story of brown bears in California is the story of humans in California makes the landscape appear empty, even haunted. The thought that brown bears lived in this land for millennia beside humans, only to perish within a reckless period of less than 150 years, is damning.

Before I turn away from the valley, another draft rushes upward, carrying the scent of sage but also a musky fragrance. The mingling of the two is intoxicating: in that moment, I imagine that the land is yearning for the grizzlies' return. Standing on this precipice, it certainly *seems* as if one of them could be down below.

And making that happen certainly seems worth a try. ■

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Jules Gill-Peterson, an associate professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, has written a book about trans history.

ANALYSIS

By JULES GILL-PETERSON • Photo by MELISSA GOLDEN

The Transgender Experience in California

The state likes to see itself as a sanctuary. But its past—and present—doesn't always support that ideal.

Last June, to celebrate Pride Month, a public library in the East Bay's San Lorenzo hosted a drag story hour for families with young kids. Five men, including one wearing a shirt that displayed a rifle and the words "Kill Your Local Pedophile," stormed the room to disrupt the event.

In a national climate in which right-wing violence continues to spike and school shootings have become horrifyingly commonplace, drag performer Panda Dulce feared the worst. The intruders screamed transphobic slurs and sexualized accusations, scaring children. The sheriff's department was called, and its deputies removed the men from the premises. They identified themselves as members of the white supremacist group the Proud Boys.

What transpired that day was one of at least 141 reported anti-drag attacks across the country in 2022, 6 of which took place in California. Although the Bay Area enjoys a reputation of being especially welcoming to LGBTQ people, the five men who targeted the drag story hour were all locals.

Measuring violence is not a straightforward task, but anti-trans attacks like this have escalated dramatically in recent years by every available metric. Hundreds of bills have been introduced in state legislatures to codify explicit anti-trans discrimination in education, organized sports, and restroom access. Other legislation has taken aim at coverage for gender-affirming healthcare, either restricting the coverage or banning it entirely.

Meanwhile, anti-LGBTQ violence has continued to rise in frequency and scope, going beyond street-level targeting of trans individuals to include threats to children's hospitals in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, a white supremacist militia's foiled attempt to disrupt Pride celebrations in Idaho, and the mass shooting at Club Q in Colorado.

In January of this year, California enacted Senate Bill 107. The law shields trans youth and their families from prosecution for seeking gender-affirming care after moving to California from a state, like Alabama or Arkansas, that has made it illegal to seek such care. Like many state bans on abortions, these laws can explicitly prohibit crossing state lines for help.

Despite the new California law, the targeting of children at San Lorenzo's drag story hour reminds us that anti-trans attackers have not spared California. As the state invites trans youth and their families to consider California a safe haven, putting these developments in their larger context reveals a bigger story: underneath the public spectacle of violent incidents are structural factors whose wear and tear are endemic. The barriers trans people have faced for decades in accessing the labor market, education, and housing have conditioned their vulnerability to police and interpersonal violence, particularly for working-class trans people and trans people of color. A polarized national political environment can make California seem like the antithesis of states drafting anti-trans legislation and policy, but the trans story of California is one in which safety and danger have never been mutually exclusive.

Trans history's enduring connection to violence began centuries ago as Spanish settler colonialism pushed north from Baja California. The rich constellation of Indigenous social and spiritual systems that today carry the pan-Indigenous name Two-Spirit were explicit targets during the Spanish colonial period. The Catholic mission system took it upon itself to police and punish people whose lives transgressed the narrow Christian definition of separate men's and women's roles. Attempting to erase Two-Spirit people through assimilation and social death was a pivotal alibi for colonial California's theft of land and political sovereignty, shaping everything that would come in its wake.

When California became a state in 1850, its two largest cities, San Francisco and Los Angeles, were already home to what are now among the oldest continuous trans communities in the country. Documented evidence of trans people living in proximity to one another or seeking out specific neighborhoods in which to live and work stretches back to the gold rush era. Western cities then had a reputation for being a little looser with morality, tolerating vice economies of saloons and sex work that catered to the unattached men whose labor migrations drew them to the "frontier." Many trans women found a viable way of life in that service economy, having few other practical options at a time when women were expected to marry or survive on low-wage piecework.

That vibrancy and public spirit of permissiveness persisted after the gold mines were tapped out. Remarkably, some of the neighborhoods associated with trans community today, like the Tenderloin or North Beach in San Francisco, were, after the Civil War, dotted with nightlife venues where a star attraction was "female impersonation," a job that afforded trans women a legitimate route to public recognition as women.

Trans men often sought out small-town life, where they'd be more likely to find acceptance within the rhythms of a community if they adopted a traditionally masculine line of work and married a woman. However, the anonymity of city life and its strength in numbers remained draws for working-class trans people and trans people of color. By the mid-20th century in Los Angeles, Hollywood and Downtown had become notorious vice neighborhoods where one could meet drag queens, trans women, and sex workers.

These early gay and trans neighborhoods also reflected urban segregation enforced by police fiat. West Hollywood's history as a queer and trans enclave has much to do with the minutiae of policing; its speakeasies and vice bars flourished in the Prohibition era precisely because they were outside LAPD jurisdiction. The Sunset Strip became a destination for LGBTQ people interested in the work opportunities—and community—of the nightlife world.

Still, California was hardly a sanctuary for trans people; state-sanctioned violence ran hand in hand with resistance. The story of the U.S. LGBTQ movement usually begins with the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City. But trans people living during the period before Stonewall were not nearly as isolated, hidden, or closeted as we might assume, and that was especially true in California. In the early 1940s, a trans woman named Louise Lawrence decided to transition on her own. Eager to meet more people like herself, she became a node in the Bay Area trans community. Despite living in a city with other trans people, though, Lawrence found everyday life dangerous.

Only a few months into going out in public as Louise, she was picked up by a police officer as she returned from the grocery store. Lawrence was white and middle-class and had the support of doctors whose authority helped get her out of that arrest. For trans people without those advantages, especially if they lived in Black or Spanish-speaking neighborhoods with a heavy-handed police presence, the mundane act of walking down the street or running errands carried an even higher risk.

Why could the police so easily arrest Lawrence? Because in 1863, San Francisco had become the first city in the United States to criminalize "cross-dressing" in public. Many other states and municipalities adopted similar laws in the decades that followed. Policing gender worked in concert with racial segregation to tightly regulate movement through urban space.

A militant streak developed in the 1960s in response to this kind of police harassment. The best-documented organized, street-level LGBTQ resistance before Stonewall took place in California and was led by trans people. In 1959, the Cooper Do-nuts Riot in Los Angeles saw drag queens and trans women fight police by hurling doughnuts, coffee, and paper plates.

As the historian Susan Stryker has detailed, the 1966 Compton's Cafeteria Riot in San Francisco was a forceful demonstration of the poorest trans people's power. When trans women who regularly hung out late at night in the cafeteria were harassed by management, they refused to leave, and the police were called. As the story goes, one of the women threw her cup of coffee in a police officer's face, sparking a brawl that became a melee in the streets.

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Louise Lawrence was arrested in the 1940s under a San Francisco law criminalizing "cross-dressing."

HORNET

Cooper Do-nuts in downtown Los Angeles was a hangout for members of the trans community in the 1950s.

DRAG
IT OUT
IN THE
OPEN
FRAMELINE

A scene from the documentary *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria*, which tells the story of a 1966 demonstration in support of trans rights.

Even after cross-dressing laws were repealed, the persistent criminalization of everyday life remained a structuring constraint for many working-class trans people and trans people of color. The pretext has shifted from cross-dressing laws to the policing of sex work and campaigns against unhoused people.

A key strategy for trans people in protecting themselves from public danger has been remaining unknown by the public. Occasionally, a trans person might become famous, or would make local papers if they were "found out," often after they had died or had been arrested. But until recently, most Californians probably shared their communities with trans people without realizing it.

What has changed in the past decade is the hypervisibility that has put trans people center stage in the public imagination. That spotlight, in turn, has provided far-right politicians and violent extremists with a pretext to try to push trans people out of public life—to cast them away where they're neither seen nor heard.

In my book, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, I tell the stories of trans youth who managed, despite staggering barriers, to socially and medically transition as far back as the mid-1960s. Theirs were by no means easy childhoods.

Georgina was a trans teenage girl whose parents brought her to UCLA's gender clinic in the mid-1960s when she made it clear that she wanted to live as a girl and medically transition. While her psychiatrist there, Lawrence Newman, felt that it was pointless to try to stop adults from being trans, he hoped there might be a legitimate window to try to extinguish transness in childhood through conversion therapy. He subjected Georgina to a course of psychiatric intervention that was punitive and surely traumatizing. Surviving those attempts to punish and police her gender was taken as proof that she was "deserving" of transition, and Newman reluctantly signed off on her request for hormones when she was 15. Georgina's parents coordinated with a new school to enroll her as a girl, and she legally changed her name. When she reached adulthood, she was finally able to access gender-affirming surgery.

For trans teenagers in the 1960s, the path to transition was a narrow and perilous one. Most were never able to do what Georgina did.

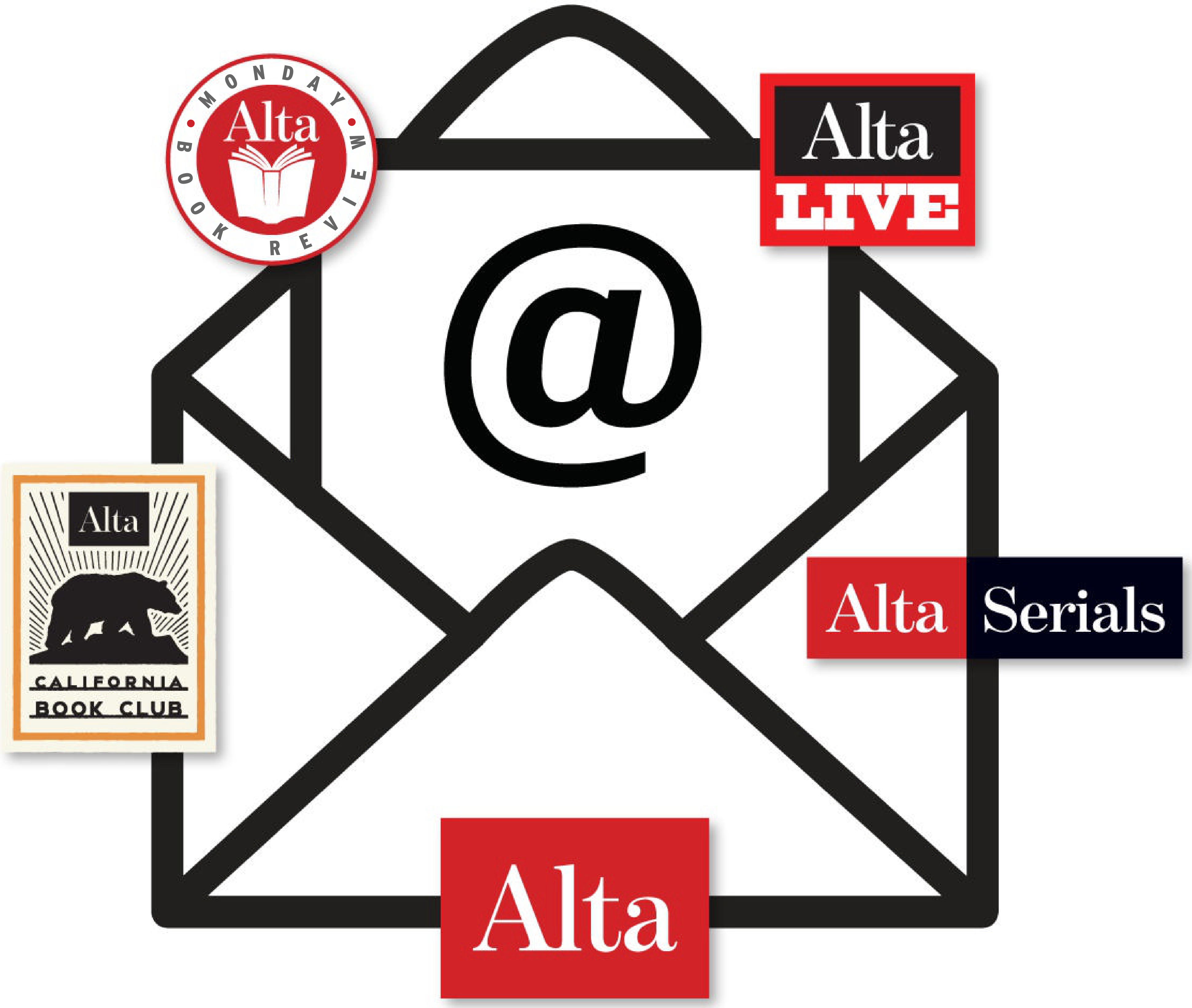
In today's California, that path is less arduous than it was six decades ago; in a growing number of other states, it's now much worse. While the everyday danger created by the policing of public space has remained consistent over time, today's rising tide of anti-trans violence adds an explicitly political layer: it is violence seeking political outcomes.

Those outcomes include the Christian authoritarian state imagined by some evangelical politicians and the white supremacist motives of the Proud Boys. Each feeds back into the everyday struggles trans people already face, painting targets on their backs. The political rhetoric built on the idea of trans women playing sports or youth transitioning has given cause to the notion that it's imperative to scrutinize the world for trans people, to seek them out, isolate and target them, or even push them out of public life altogether.

It's hard to argue with the feeling many trans people share that they are less safe today than they were several years ago—even in California, even with the passing of SB 107.

Still, contextualizing these latest political attacks inside a structural history of violence and danger helps us better appreciate the stakes. Until the enduring problems of accessing education, housing, the labor market, and the resources needed to transition are addressed—until our shared public world, including the streets we walk down, is built for the trans women, sex workers, and trans people of color who have made homes together for centuries—safety will remain a superficial horizon. ■

Jules Gill-Peterson is the author of Histories of the Transgender Child *(2018) and an associate professor of history at Johns Hopkins University.*



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The author spars with fellow student Belinda Chen while training in the self-defense practice of krav maga.

FIGHT CLUB

By MONICA CORCORAN HAREL
• *Photos by* CHRISTINA GANDOLFO

A Superhero on Steroids

In response to grim statistics on abuse, one woman learns to defend herself so that she may "walk in peace."

My wrists throb. My knuckles are bruised and nicked. Dried blood flecks my slim gold wedding band. "Looks like you're punching too hard and too fast," says my self-defense instructor when I show him my swollen fists. Maybe I am. Of course I am. My thrusts are not my own. My left hook is dedicated to my 12-year-old daughter, Tess, who recently told me she gets bullied by boys at her middle school. *Bam!* My right hook goes out to the man who once chased me through a deserted parking garage. *Pow!* And my groin kick—*oof!*—is retribution for the one in three women who are physically or sexually abused in their lifetime.

The truth hurts: it's inherently dangerous to be a woman in this world.

Not this woman, though. Not anymore. A month ago, after reading that 9 out of every 10 adult victims of rape are female and realizing that I couldn't land a solid punch, I enrolled in a fight club known for its ruthless approach to self-defense. Krav maga, which translates from Hebrew to "contact combat" and is pronounced "krahv muh-*gah*," is an 85-year-old discipline created by Imi Lichtenfeld and later developed for the Israel Defense Forces. Unlike in mixed martial arts (or MMA), an equally vicious system of kicking ass where actions like spitting and headbutting are fouls, there are no rules in krav maga. Is hair pulling allowed? Yank away. May I gouge out an attacker's eye? Don't stop at one.

When I first considered which method of self-defense to study, the sheer brutality of krav maga seduced me. It felt like payback for all the gender conditioning to "smile" and "always be polite" that I'd absorbed growing up during the Reagan era. A fourth-grade teacher once told me, "Put a ribbon in your hair tomorrow and quit stomping around" when I shared that a boy had shoved me during recess. Talk about toxic femininity. Advice like that invites peril when one in five girls is a victim of child sexual abuse. Four decades later, I told my own then-10-year-old daughter to retaliate verbally if a boy got physical with her at school. I showed her how to put both her hands on his shoulders and lean in so he felt her presence, her prepubescent menace. I said to her, "Don't knock him down. Just look him in the eyes and say, 'You are never allowed to push me around.'" We practiced the drill twice.

Most self-defense workshops for women are equally brief and basic

GETTY IMAGES

Self-defense training for women gained popularity in the early 1900s. A woman fends off an attacker in these 1906 studio photographs.

in nature. You take a three-hour class that covers how to stride with confidence, suss out a deserted stairwell at night, and use a key as a makeshift weapon in an attack. This time around, I wanted to learn how to defend myself like a superhero on steroids in any situation—especially since the United Nations reports that violence against women has intensified during COVID-19. Enter krav maga: you can't even test for your Level 1 self-defense yellow belt until you undergo 40 rigorous hours of classes. Trust me: during some of those hours, you will taste your own blood, sweat, and tears—maybe even all at once. Budapest-born Lichtenfeld, an unassuming man with a big mustache who devised this personal security system in the 1930s to combat anti-Semitic gangs in his hometown of Bratislava, once said that he taught people to fight "so one may walk in peace."

My first day of krav maga training in an L.A. suburb is anything but peaceful. There are no introductions or pleasantries. Our class of about a dozen students jogs around the perimeter of the mirrored gym in Sherman Oaks for a few minutes, and then we pair off to fight. "If you think someone wants to choke you, think again," says our instructor. "An attacker can crush your trachea in three seconds with two thumbs." For that reason—and many other life-threatening hazards that come with an assault—we always start by adopting our fighting stance. I tuck my chin, raise my hands to eye level to protect my face, and move my feet apart at a slight diagonal with my back heel raised an inch. In this position, I'm remarkably stable and can propel my weight into every strike. When we match up to spar, I meet a sinewy millennial named Lucy who tells me she signed up for krav maga because her German shepherd—"my protector"—died a few months ago, and she likes to walk at night.

Women have a long history of appointing protectors instead of empowering themselves. Most likely because they were forbidden to throw a punch. In her book *Her Own Hero: The Origins of the Women's Self-Defense Movement*, San José State University associate professor and historian Wendy L. Rouse chronicles women's struggle to get physical. In the late 1800s, for instance, a prominent Harvard physician named Edward Clarke cautioned that any extreme athleticism could compromise a female's fertility; another prevailing norm was that women were just the weaker sex and shouldn't even bother with such exertion. But in Chicago in 1909, 20-year-old nursing student Wilma Berger foiled a male attacker using jujitsu, and the incident swayed public opinion. Berger went on to teach self-defense to local society women. It was time for women to put down their parasols and put up their dukes. That same year, pioneering equal rights activist and New York physician Maude Glasgow advocated for ladies to learn to box: "Woman has the same weapons for defending herself that man has, and a little instruction in the manner of using them would enable her to beat off brutal assailants."

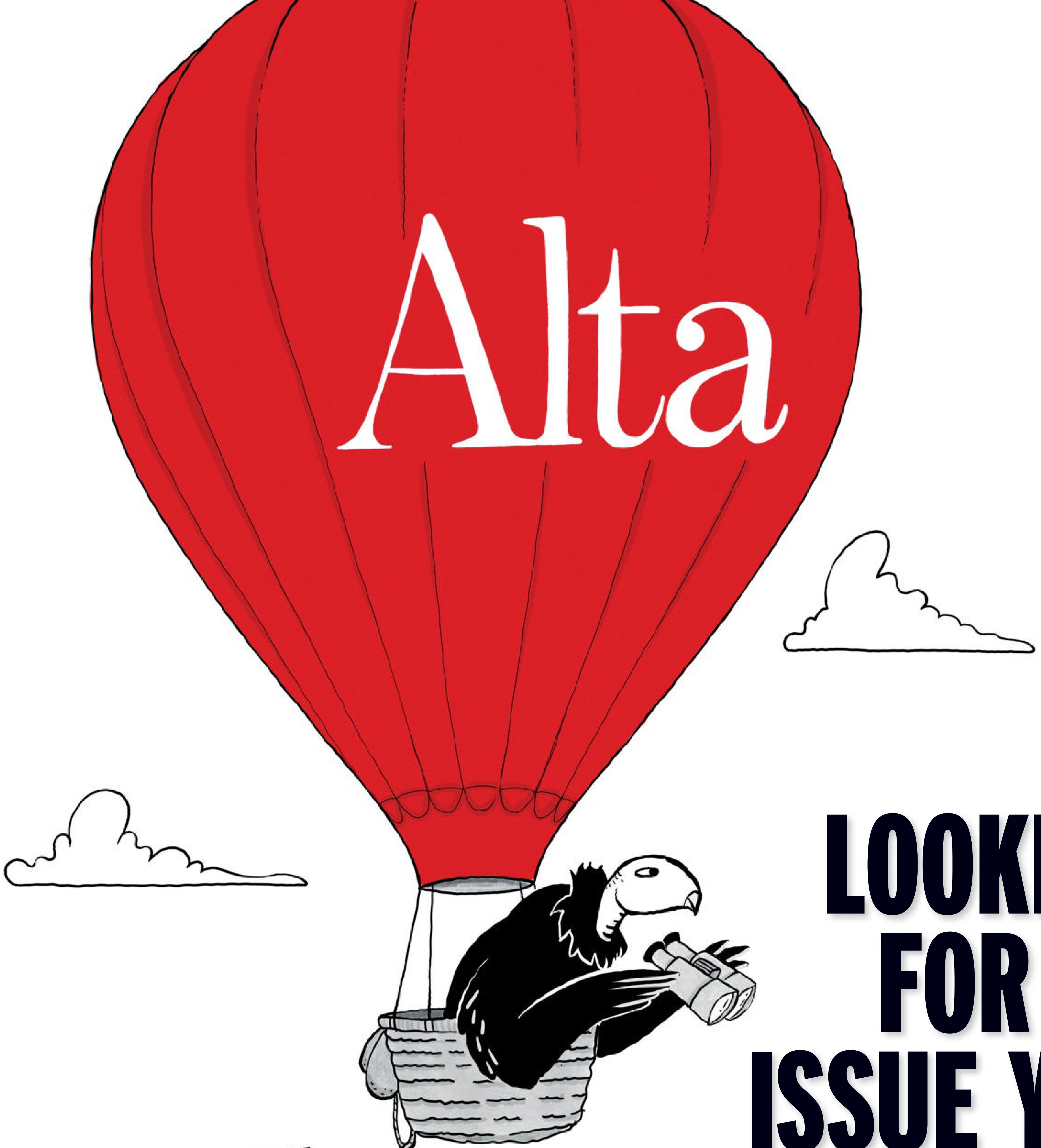
It would take until 1994 for Congress, in a bipartisan vote, to pass the first comprehensive law to protect abused women, known as the Violence Against Women Act. The bill was written by then-senator Joseph Biden to protect survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, add resources and training programs for law enforcement, and fund rape crisis centers. Until then, domestic abuse was considered a "private matter," and police rarely intervened. The law expired during President Donald Trump's term, in 2019, and wasn't renewed until last year. Sadly, that lapse coincided with an uptick in domestic violence during the COVID lockdown.

My krav maga classes are split equally between women and men. We always pair up for intense drills and try to toggle between genders. When I can catch my breath, I poll my assailants: Why self-defense? One woman tells me, as she headbutts me in the chest—we always protect ourselves with padded tombstone-shaped shields—that she's here because of a home invasion. As we grapple over a rubber gun in a stairwell, another classmate reveals that she often travels the world alone and has been physically harassed on buses and trains. A man in his 20s says, "Some jerks grow up but still pick on guys who are easy targets." It hits me—as I get hit—that I'm a lucky statistic.

At 55, I have never been abducted, assaulted, or raped. However, like most women, I have faced serious threats. For instance, the man who trailed me in the garage in West L.A. after a late night at work was definitely an assailant. He wore head-to-toe black and mirrored sunglasses. When I quickened my pace, he started jogging toward me. I ran to my car, locked the doors, and leaned on the horn as I revved the engine. I watched in my rearview mirror as he gave me the finger and sidled off behind a pole. My hands shook so badly on my drive home that I pulled over twice. I kept thinking that I would have been forced to watch myself get raped or battered in his sunglasses if he'd caught me.

Would I do anything differently to thwart an attack now that I know how to shimmy out of a choke hold and throw an elbow strike? Nope. Krav maga is all about living to tell the tale—even if that story ends anticlimactically with you hightailing it to safety. You always avoid a fight if you can. But secretly, I long to avenge every woman who has ever been physically or sexually abused. This fantasy sees me employing all the self-defense techniques I've learned in my month of training. I poke eyes. I stomp toes. I crush tracheae. I am no longer a woman endangered. I am a dangerous woman. And after 30 more hours of self-defense prep, I'll know exactly what to do if anyone ever catches me. ■

Monica Corcoran Harel is the founder of Pretty Ripe, *a media platform for women over 40.*



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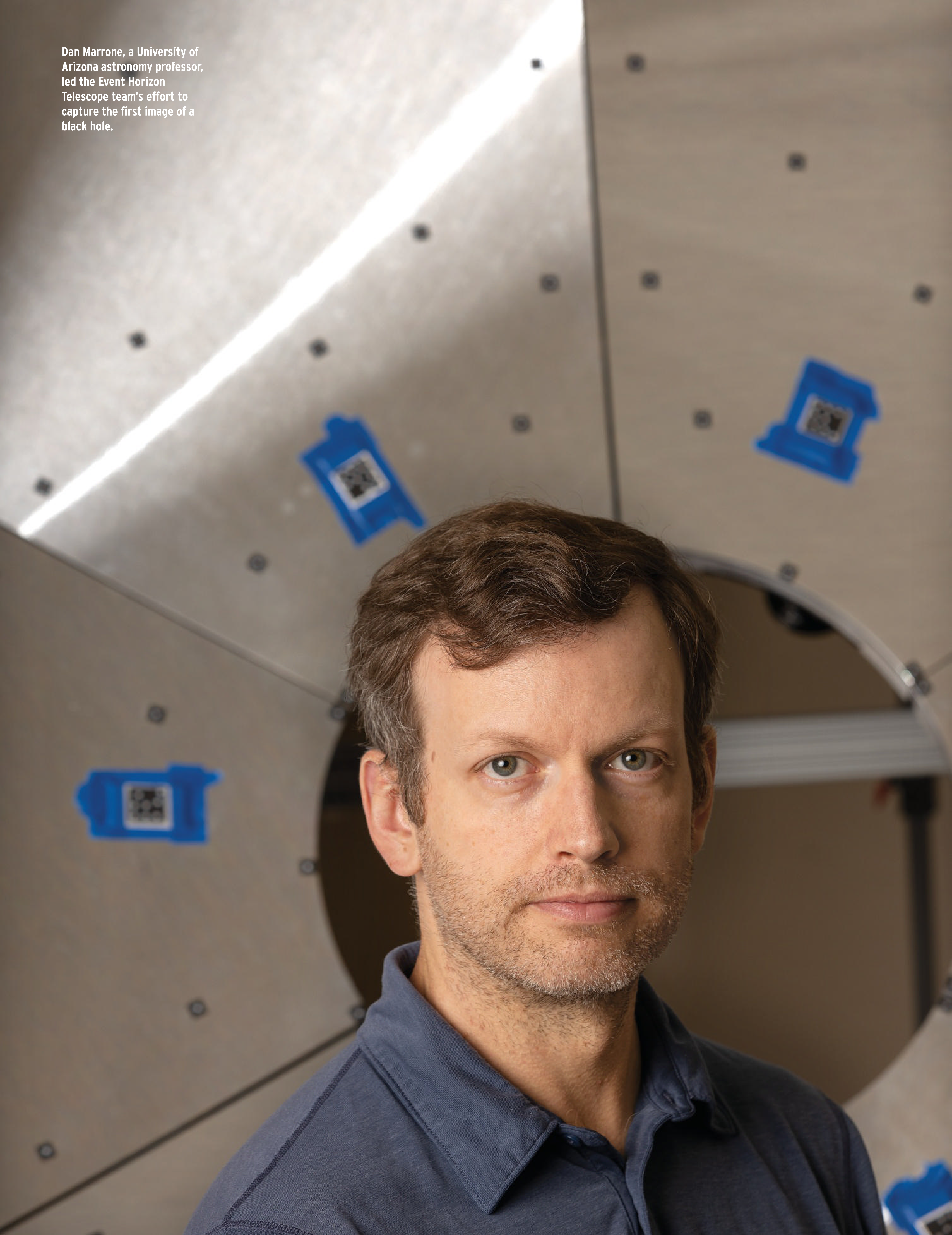
Dan Marrone, a University of Arizona astronomy professor, led the Event Horizon Telescope team's effort to capture the first image of a black hole.



INVISIBLE NO MORE

By SARAH SCOLES • *Photos by* SCOTT BAXTER

How to See a Black Hole

The Event Horizon Telescope has given us the first-ever images of these mysterious phenomena. Next, the James Webb Space Telescope will join this project to better understand their behavior, including their eating habits and how they've shaped the cosmos.

Dan Marrone was alone in a Minnesota cabin one afternoon five summers ago. While his family was lake swimming, he logged on to his computer and waited for the big meeting to start. Members of his scientific team were going to reveal a picture they'd worked for years to get: the first-ever portrait of a black hole, very up close and extremely personal.

Marrone, a professor at the University of Arizona, sat back with a vacation beer and prepared for the show-and-tell of the black hole at the center of a galaxy named M87. He watched his screen and waited.

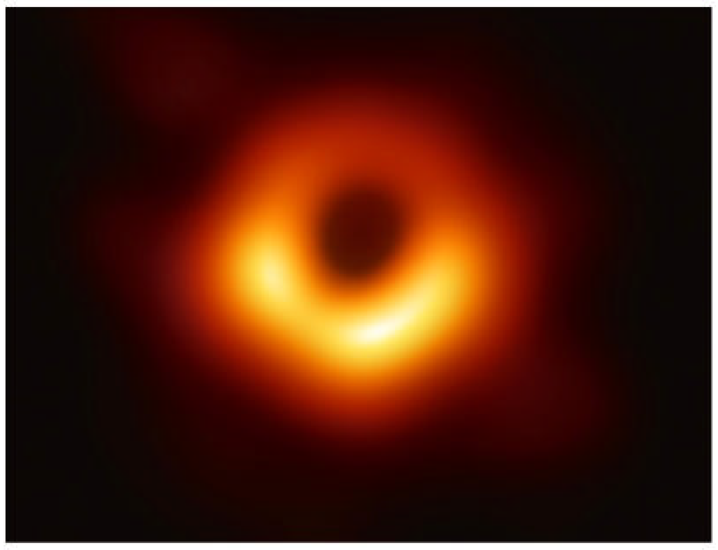
Supermassive black holes like M87's, which is more than 6.5 billion times as massive as the sun, are the universe's most extreme objects, with matter crushed together into such a small space that even light can't escape the great gravity. They're at the centers of most galaxies, which makes them fairly common (astronomers don't know precisely how many galaxies exist in the universe, but data from the *New Horizons* spacecraft indicates there are hundreds of billions out there), yet no one had yet produced a picture of one.

Scientists like Marrone cannot peer *inside* the infinitely dense depths of black holes, which remain experientially unknowable, but they *can* look at the light immediately outside those disks of darkness, in the area where a black hole becomes black—a terrifying place called the event horizon.

When the shot of M87's core finally appeared as pixels on Marrone's screen, he and his fellow team members celebrated. After their jubilation subsided, Marrone was, as much as anything, relieved. The black hole looked like a black hole should. Which wasn't very impressive: it resembled a doughnut, glazed shinier on one side than the other, that had been set atop a black party napkin and photographed fuzzily.

But Marrone found it beautifully concrete. The middle of the doughnut was the literal shadow of a literal black hole; the glazed torus showed light bending and whipping around in the hole's intense gravity. For so long, black holes had been math and inference. Now this one, at least, was a *thing*.

And it was a thing made possible by a project Marrone had worked on since it started in 2009, called the Event Horizon Telescope. He and colleagues had cleverly strung eight telescopes together—from California to Chile, from Greenland to the South Pole, and from France to Arizona—linking them in such a way that they acted like a single observatory the size of the globe. And there, in his cabin, Marrone saw the EHT's first fruits, which would not be revealed to the public till the next year, when the team would be confident that its results would hold up to scientific scrutiny. "I couldn't tell anyone, but I had a nice, relaxing rest of that week," he says.


NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

EHT scientists revealed the first-ever image of a black hole—at the center of galaxy M87, 55 million light-years from Earth—in April 2019.

He finished his beer, alone with his team's secret: he and a select group of other scientists had seen something previously unseeable.

More than half a year later, in April 2019, the rest of us did too. The EHT made big headlines then, and it's continued working ever since, checking out black holes in multiple observation campaigns. The project has added several telescopes to its arsenal, including, in 2019, an instrument on Kitt Peak, a mountain in Arizona. Data from the EHT will help scientists determine whether Einstein's theory of general relativity is fully accurate—whether the universe at its extreme edges behaves as he predicted.

But black holes aren't just esoteric testing grounds: they've also played a major role in determining how the universe looks today and how it got that way. Their mass, energy, and eating habits have shaped the cosmos for eons. They help reveal, in other words, evolution on the largest scale. "There's enough there to make us go to the ends of the earth to try and study them," says Marrone. He means it.

MORE THAN PRETTY PICTURES

The EHT's snapshots aren't the be-all and end-all for the astronomers. "Those doughnut pictures are just pretty pictures, where 'pretty' may be defined loosely," admits Marrone. "We didn't learn that much." Knowledge about a black hole comes from deeper data, which the scientists find by looking, for instance, at the orientation of the light waves leaving it and trying to understand how material flows into the abyss, how jets of hot stuff flow out, and how its supercharged magnetic field works. The researchers discovered, for example, that a black hole's magnetic field can be strong enough to stop plasma—a substance that makes up around 99 percent of the universe and is so hot that atoms are stripped of their electrons—from falling into the no-return zone. The plasma is also more stable, and less variable, than they expected. "To this day, we don't know why," says Chi-Kwan Chan, an associate research professor at the University of Arizona's Steward Observatory and an EHT team member.

Chan got his start in the field years ago, programming a new supercomputer to do simulations of black holes, and went on to devise the simulations showing EHT scientists what they could expect—which informed the design of their telescope instruments. Today, he develops the software that sucks in and synthesizes data from each observation run by the project's 11 telescopes. Recently, his code and the team's analysis produced a second black-hole glamour shot: of the one in our Milky Way. Surprise: it's another doughnut, with glazily bright areas spread around its core. But that doughnut is central to our existence.

Meanwhile, the uncertainties the team encounters—the holes in our knowledge, if you will—are actually good, in Chan's opinion. "When we see something unexpected, we're actually happy," he says. "Because that means we can learn something new."

11 TELESCOPES AS ONE

The EHT team began preparing well in advance for its March 2022 observation campaign. Previously, Marrone and graduate student Arash Roshanineshat had worked hard to bring the Kitt Peak 12-Meter Telescope online.

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It needed a new receiver—kind of like a camera for a radio telescope—to be able to detect black holes, and engineers had to build one. Then Marrone's team had to install it and test it, along with a whole lot of electronics and an atomic clock, to capture and record the signal and ultra-precisely align the 12-meter's observations with those of the 10 other telescopes. "Every time you put one of these sites together, they're just different," says Marrone.

And for each one, the team has to sweat the details, like whether electrical currents beneath the 12-meter's building might mess with the atomic clock's timing. "We have to worry about how the cables flow, and will the wind blowing on them change the temperature and change their electrical length and make the signal wiggle in time?" says Marrone, sounding a bit frantic even now.

Those hands-on aspects are what Roshanineshat, an electrical engineer, enjoys the most, and fellow team member Amy Lowitz, an EHT scientist at the University of Arizona, agrees. She trains researchers at the South Pole to do EHT observations during the Antarctica winter—the place and time on the planet perhaps most like a black hole. "It's not all sitting at a desk, staring at numbers," she says. "There's this whole other world of getting your hands dirty and crawling around on the floor, fixing a telescope, and moving cables around and soldering tiny things and threatening large telescopes with large wrenches to get them to work."

It's like fixing your sink, in other words, on a different scale.

A few weeks ahead of the March 2022 observations, Roshanineshat returned to the Arizona high country to inspect and rewire the telescopes and communication devices as needed. He remained there during the week-long campaign: he was in charge of running the instrument this season.

The Kitt Peak 12-Meter, which detects radio waves, is Roshanineshat's favorite telescope. He likes the shape of the dome that covers the antenna when it's not in use but opens like a gargantuan clamshell when he commands it to. "Maybe because I spend a lot of time up there, that created a connection," he says, "between the telescope and myself."

During the campaign, commands that Roshanineshat had prepared earlier guided the telescope's gaze from one black hole to another to another, and, simultaneously, the other, networked telescopes peered at the same strange objects, a planet-size cryptid with many eyes. He checked whether the black holes' signals were coming through and streaming into the bank of storage disks. He couldn't see what the gathered information might reveal: it comes in at too fast a rate to do anything but commit it to computer memory, so the objects remained as invisible to him as to everyone else.

As he watched the telescope go from black hole to black hole and move toward their individual darknesses, he felt proud. The cosmic objects had released the energy the telescope was picking up millions of years ago. He was observing them as they had been, long before humans were a glimmer in earthly evolution's eye.

TWINKLE, TWINKLE

After each campaign, the EHT team mails hundreds of hard disks from its sites to the Max Planck Institute for Radio Astronomy in Bonn, Germany, and to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Haystack Observatory for analysis. There, they're "correlated," meaning that specialized computers spin their signals together, digitally pretending that the output from 11 sites all came from one very large instrument. The results are further scrutinized to make sure nothing went awry. "Then, finally, we have something that is sort of a draft data set that we can start trying to make images with," says Marrone.

Already, the data is proving to hold more than doughnut images. Marrone, for instance, has watched a black hole wiggling around. "It's kind of like a twinkling of a star in the sky," he says. "We know it's doing something really fast."

In the months ahead, the team might learn more about how that "something" works, because it'll be adding a higher frequency of radio waves to its observations—kind of like taking a picture with a red lens and then a blue lens and putting them together—which means it'll get sharper images, nittier-grittier data.

And the EHT's ability to grasp the mostly invisible is also being strengthened by another instrument: the James Webb Space Telescope, NASA's flagship observatory that launched in December 2021 and came online last year. The JWST can't *see* black holes in the way the EHT can. Its gaze can pierce the dust near galaxies' cores to see gas nearby and measure how fast it's flowing outward, and it can detect the presence of individual chemicals. These capabilities can help researchers understand how black holes eat and get bigger.

Later this year, the JWST will join the slate of EHT instruments as they shed more light on our own galaxy's black hole, how it and others molded themselves, and how they shaped the universe. As Marrone promises, the EHT will go not just to the ends of the earth but also beyond. ■

STEWARD OBSERVATORY

Amy Lowitz, an EHT scientist, helps train fellow researchers to make observations at the South Pole.

Sarah Scoles is a freelance journalist and the author or coauthor of the books Making Contact, They Are Already Here, *and* Astronomical Mindfulness. *She wrote about space-based solar power for* Alta Journal *20.*

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By Katya Cengel • *Photos by* Penni Gladstone

California's Monuments Men and Women

During wildfires and other natural disasters, art and artifacts often get left behind. Colonel Kirk Sturm and his team aim to rescue these cultural treasures.

It was 7:30 in the morning on November 8, 2018, and the sky was dark. Embers as long as five or six inches were falling around Mark Thorp's home in the small Northern California town of Paradise. A former firefighter, Thorp knew what the glowing debris meant—the flames were close.

As he loaded a go bag containing important family documents, photographs, and other irreplaceable items into his van, he fielded calls from his two places of employment: the Paradise Ridge Chamber of Commerce, where he is a business advocate, and the Gold Nugget Museum, where he is the executive director. A maintenance man at the Gold Nugget, Bob, wanted to know what to do with the museum's 25,000 items. There were Henry rifles—dating back to the 1800s—old vehicles, and Indigenous grinding pots. Officially opened in 1981, the museum had been collecting items related to life on "the Ridge" (as locals call the region) since 1965.

Thorp wasn't too worried about the artifacts, believing the blaze would be stopped, as all the previous flare-ups on the Ridge in recent years had been. "We knew how prone we were to a [large-scale] wildfire in this case but never treated it as though it was a real thing," he says.

Nevertheless, Thorp headed out of town, stopping by the chamber of commerce to retrieve the main server. As Thorp waited in traffic, Bob called again. The conflagration was approaching. Thorp told Bob to abandon the building. Bob and two helpers managed to retrieve a small number of items and load them into one of three personal vehicles at the site, prioritizing the historic toys on loan for an exhibit and the museum's computer terminals. Then Bob locked the doors and left.

It was three weeks before they were able to get back onto the Ridge. By then, Thorp knew the Gold Nugget was gone. The Camp Fire, as it became known, had been the state's deadliest and most destructive wildfire, killing 85 people and destroying almost 19,000 homes, including Thorp's. It was the Paradise Police Department that called to tell Thorp that the museum's main structure at 502 Pearson Road was no more. The only item salvaged was an American flag hoisted on a flagpole outside. Everything else—including research material about life on the Ridge dating back to the 1850s—was gone. The museum staff had an emergency evacuation plan, says Thorp. "However, it doesn't prepare you for situations where you're looking at a mass evacuation of materials and personnel."

MARTHA MENDOZA/AP PHOTO

The Gold Nugget Museum and its 25,000 objects were destroyed by the Camp Fire, which engulfed Paradise, California, in November 2018.

TO CONSERVE AND PROTECT

On California's Central Coast, the loss of the Gold Nugget got a military man with a state parks background thinking. During World War II, the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program, made famous by the 2014 George Clooney movie *The Monuments Men*, tasked soldiers with protecting cultural resources.

"What if we took that same concept and did it during emergencies in California?" says Colonel Kirk Sturm of the California State Guard, part of the National Guard.

In 2019, the United States Army and the Smithsonian Institution announced an initiative that would continue the legacy of the Monuments program by training and supporting soldiers charged with protecting cultural artifacts during armed conflict. Natural disasters and civilian unrest are another matter. In the United States, just 42 percent of cultural institutions had an emergency/disaster plan as of 2014, according to a 2019 survey conducted by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the main source of federal support for U.S. libraries and museums. That is because many lack resources, or, more precisely, money, says Stacy Bowe, the training program manager at the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative.

The idea that the millions of artifacts stored in California's thousands of archives, museums, and other heritage institutions could be destroyed by fires, floods, earthquakes, or even civil unrest troubled Sturm. In addition to his military service, Sturm has served as a division chief for California's Department of Parks and Recreation and as a museum director-superintendent of the Hearst Castle State Historic Monument. When artifacts are destroyed, he explains, more than just paintings or documents are lost. The stories of a segment of society are also erased. "Those voices are silenced," says Sturm.

Members of California's Heritage Emergency Response Team practice packing and preserving wet documents during an exercise at Camp San Luis Obispo in fall 2022.

CALIFORNIA

The intrigue and daring of the movie version, in which the program's recruits track down stolen artwork, in reality is overshadowed by acronyms and policy. In his home office in Los Osos, Sturm, who is 68, keeps not priceless antiquities but mugs filled with pens—five of them. Data is where he started his project, first learning the number of heritage institutions in California—4,000 to 6,000—then working with state agencies to find out what their responsibilities were in regard to heritage-resource protection. He discovered that while there were limited efforts in place, there was no uniform action plan.

Sturm and his team turned to Barclay Ogden, a retired UC Berkeley Library director of preservation who had helped develop the library's preservation program, which in turn led to the creation of other conservation labs in the UC system. Ogden saw that the military can do what civilians like him cannot—protect artifacts during emergencies rather than just try to salvage them after the fact. Called the Heritage Emergency Response Team, the program is managed by the California Military Department, which oversees the California State Guard, and it addresses everything from evacuation and salvage to security. Sturm hopes that in the future HERT will serve as a model for other states, starting a national trend of guardsmen and -women protecting heritage sites during disasters.

Colonel Kirk Sturm, center, of the California State Guard, spearheads the HERT program, which was inspired in part by the 2014 George Clooney movie *The Monuments Men*.

FIRST RESPONDERS

The first test was not a disaster but civil unrest. In the early-morning mist on the first Saturday of October 2022, a team of security officers in tactical vests, with their 9-millimeter pistols drawn, quietly approached Rutledge Museum in San Luis Obispo. Lookouts positioned themselves on each side of the small single-story building. A team of four entered.

"Military police!" A flashlight shone in the dark corners of the one-room museum. "Clear!" The quartet moved toward the bathrooms at the end of the space. They banged open stall doors, pistols aimed, searching for the people who had been targeting the museum and harassing its staff since Monday.

On Friday night, the protesters had escalated things. They took over Rutledge's IT system. Then they used it to turn on the sprinklers, damaging the Indigenous artifacts on loan to the museum.

Cherity Bacon, tribal archivist for the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, explains the significance of such objects, using handwoven baskets as an example. The last prolific basket weavers lived four or five generations ago, and their works are irreplaceable. Bacon says that according to the tribe's beliefs, "baskets are considered ancestors. They're organic living beings in their own sense."

Once the museum was secured, military personnel armed with Sharpies and packing materials instead of pistols took over—bubble wrapping and boxing.

"Ready to go, let's go," a HERT member called as he placed a lid on a box and moved it outside.

By 11 a.m., all the artifacts had been evacuated. The military police had taken off their vests and put down their pistols.

There were no protesters inside.

There never were.

The pistols were plastic, what the military calls "rubber ducks." The museum was a building at Camp San Luis Obispo, a California National Guard training facility. The event was just an exercise to prove HERT was ready for the real thing.

While the core HERT team numbers about 20, it can draw on two dozen or so subject experts as well as a pool of hundreds from the state guard and volunteers. About 70 personnel, from as far south as San Diego and as far north as Sacramento, participated in the Rutledge Museum scenario.

The closest HERT has come to the real thing happened in August 2021 while Sturm was hosting a training inspired by the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative. The Caldor Fire was raging near Lake Tahoe, and Leslie Hartzell, chief of the California Department of Parks and Recreation's Cultural Resources Division, asked HERT for advice on evacuating the Hellman-Ehrman Mansion in Sugar Pine Point State Park. HERT members were ready to deploy, but the local park staff managed to remove some artifacts, and in the end, the building was not burned. Nevertheless, Hartzell is grateful for the line of communication that was established with HERT and for how Sturm is preparing the guard for such emergencies. "This is a really clear mission: to have the California military trained and ready to deploy."

IT TAKES A TEAM

Military, law enforcement, and history backgrounds are common among HERT members. California State Guard chief warrant officer 4 Mark Denger, age 63, is a fifth-generation Californian who also brings firsthand experience to the team. In 1995, he was working as an archivist at a museum in Southern California when El Niño caused major flooding across the state. A colleague at the museum who was in the state guard asked for Denger's help at Sacramento's California Citizen Soldier Museum, which had been inundated with water. When Denger arrived, most of the deluge was gone, but "devastation was everywhere," he says. "Mold was on the walls, mold was in the bookshelves." Historical military logs and record books dating back to the 1850s were waterlogged. Military uniforms and leather shoes were ruined.

Denger helped the museum's staff methodically remove artifacts and sift through them to figure out what was most valuable and what could be saved. It was a tedious process that stretched over months. Denger estimates that they were able to salvage just 12 percent of the holdings that had been affected. A year later, he joined the California State Guard, and he now serves with the Military Museum Command, which is responsible for preserving California's military heritage.

The separation between whom HERT helps and who participates in HERT is not always clear. Jason Espinoza, UC Riverside's former director of emergency management, began collaborating with the program's team after asking HERT to advise him on the school's special collections in October 2020; a museum there had suffered minor flood damage earlier in the year.

The university's rare items include the Keystone-Mast Collection, the largest assemblage of stereoscopic (3-D) photographs and negatives in the world, which is housed at UCR Arts, an off-campus photography museum and contemporary arts center. Before the HERT visit, UCR Arts director of collections Leigh Gleason had an

HERT artifact-team members safeguard and prepare to evacuate Indigenous artifacts during the fall 2022 training exercise.

emergency plan in place. The Keystone-Mast's glass-plate negatives are stored in blue file cabinet–like structures on seismic base isolators, which dissipate the forces generated by earthquakes. But evacuation in the event of a fire would be extremely difficult, because the cabinets weigh several tons and are in the basement, and to expect the minimal museum staff (some of whom are older and live far away) to move them in an emergency wasn't feasible.

"It's one thing to put something on your priority salvage list; it's entirely another to think about the logistics of actually evacuating it if it needed to be evacuated," says Gleason.

Other significant holdings include one of the original *Spider-Man* comic books and one of the largest science fiction collections in the world, which are housed at the campus library. Like UCR Arts, the library has a disaster-recovery plan, says Espinoza. "But they don't have the equipment or the resources—financial or human—to be able to do that. And that's where HERT would come in and supplement."

The need for artifact rescue becomes obvious following disasters and near misses. During the 2018 Carr Fire, Parks and Recreation's Hartzell was worried about wagons.

"We got the collections out of the museum and the other buildings, and I was like, 'What about the wheeled vehicles?'" she says. "We were like, 'We can't handle it. We just don't have the resources.'"

Stagecoaches, wagons, and other vehicles at Shasta State Historic Park had been carefully stored by a specialist. Getting them out without harming them was going to be very challenging.

HERT did not yet exist, but Hartzell knew Sturm by reputation. After the danger had passed, she called and asked him what the military could do. They talked over several scenarios. "Could the wagons roll?" "Would they be able to wrap them in fire retardant?" Sturm explained that the state guard had vehicles and equipment that would be able to lift and transport the wagons or help move other valuable objects in a more efficient manner.

RECOVER AND REBUILD

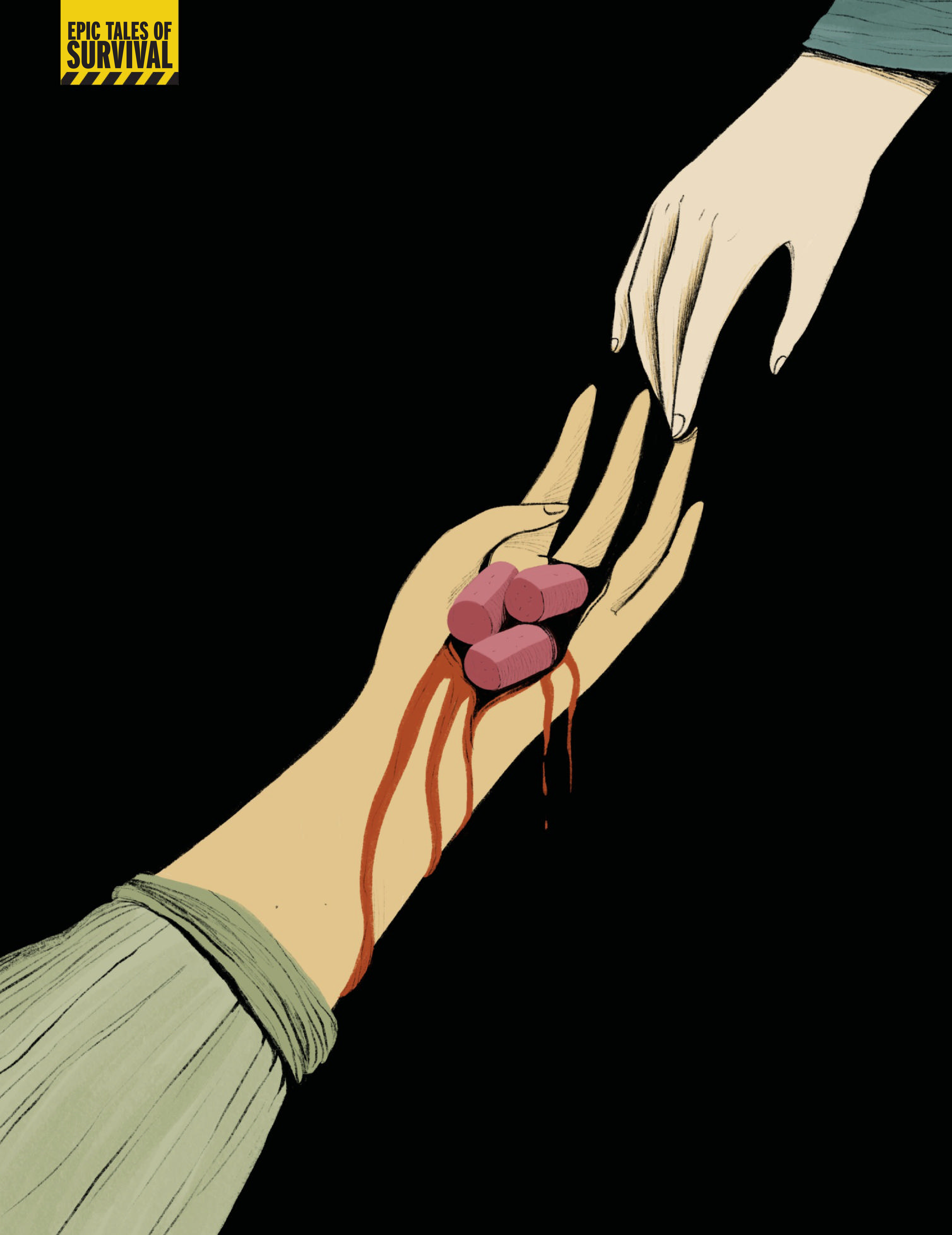
For disaster survivors, the holdings of local museums often represent what it means to be part of a community. Saving just a portion of the objects can preserve this connection. Denger believes that rescuing even 10 percent of a collection is worthwhile because then "you've got something to come back and rebuild."

In Paradise, three years after the fire that inspired HERT's founding, Thorp was finally able to examine the few burned items that remained at the Gold Nugget. Some stone mortars and pestles used by Indigenous people. Porcelain doll faces. They will probably be part of the Camp Fire exhibit the rebuilt museum is planning.

Among the items on display will be the thumb-size C-hook that failed at a PG&E transmission tower and thereby started the fire. The C-hook, according to Thorp, cost less than a quarter when it was purchased in 1919 and caused more than $16 billion in devastation. It destroyed the museum. Now it will help rebuild it.

From his own work in state parks and at Hearst Castle, Sturm knows that the devastation at Paradise is about more than just monetary loss. "Those artifacts, and those papers, represent California," he says. ■

Katya Cengel is the author of Straitjackets and Lunch Money, *forthcoming from Woodhall Press in fall 2023, as well as* From Chernobyl with Love: Reporting from the Ruins of the Soviet Union *and* Exiled: From the Killing Fields of Cambodia to California and Back. *Her article "Michaela's Shadow," written for altaonline.com, won first place in narrative storytelling in the Society for Features Journalism 2022 Excellence-in-Features Competition.*



BOHEMIAN GROVE

By Joy Lanzendorfer • *Illustrations by* Laura Pérez

‘Look Out or You’ll Be Poisoned’

A TALE OF LOVE, TAINTED MARSHMALLOWS, AND MURDER AT THE CARMEL ARTIST COLONY.

The attempted murder happened on an ordinary spring day at the Carmel artist colony in 1914. The novelist Alice MacGowan went to get something to eat from the cooler on the back porch of her home overlooking the bay. When she took a bite of leftover chili con carne, something tasted off. Assuming it was spoiled, she spat it out.

Also in the cooler was an unfamiliar tin of marshmallows. MacGowan thought it was a gift from a friend who didn't want to disturb her while she was working. Since she didn't like marshmallows, she gave the box to Aki, a Japanese man she had hired to work around the house. When he bit into the candy, he became violently ill—in some accounts, he fell down in convulsions.

A doctor determined that Aki had been poisoned. The marshmallow had been hollowed out and filled with strychnine. Aki, who soon recovered, had ingested tainted candy meant for MacGowan. And not only that: a toxicologist confirmed that the chili con carne and some mayonnaise in the cooler were also laced with strychnine—enough "to kill the entire literary colony," reported the *San Francisco Call*.

MacGowan, a successful novelist, was well-liked. The residents at the colony were baffled that someone would try to kill her, and so was McGowan herself. When asked about the crime, she said, "My death could be of no possible interest to anyone. I would not believe at first that poison had been placed in my food. Since it is certain that was done, I am utterly unable to conceive the reason why.... I did not know I had an enemy; even now I do not believe I have one."

The case made national news, reaching as far east as Washington, D.C., and New York. To make matters worse, two unnamed women living in the colony received anonymous letters threatening their lives. "'Look out or you'll be poisoned,' is the tenor of these missives," wrote the *San Francisco Call*.

What followed was one of the strangest summers in the history of the colony. While novelists played detective and the press salivated for scandal, a shadow settled over the little town on the Central Coast. Attempted murder as well as theft gave way to actual murder, all targeting female artists who lived alone. As the critic Van Wyck Brooks, who lived in the area, writes in his 1965 autobiography, "Carmel was a wildwood with an operatic setting where life itself also seemed half operatic and where curious dramas were taking place in the bungalows and cabins, smothered in blossoming vines." But, he adds, "what was it in the Carmel atmosphere that so conduced to violence?"

The Carmel artist colony started in 1905, when the poet George Sterling moved to town. Jack London's best friend and Ambrose Bierce's student, Sterling was known for his romantic poetry, bohemian lifestyle, and Dante-like nose, which he showed off by frequently posing in profile. He came to the area after learning that the Carmel Development Company had slashed rates on real estate to a $10 down payment for a mortgage and $6 monthly rental fees—affordable even for writers and artists. Mary Austin, author of *The Land of Little Rain*, soon followed, as did the photographer Arnold Genthe and the writer Jimmy Hopper.

But it was the 1906 earthquake that cemented Carmel's reputation as an artistic utopia. Creative people fled the destruction of San Francisco for the town's gnarled cypress trees, white-sand beaches, and—as they described it—a "peacock blue" sea. Over time, members of the colony would include authors Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis, poet Robinson Jeffers, journalist Lincoln Steffens, and many painters, such as Xavier Martínez, Armin Hansen, Guy Rose, and William Ritschel. Jack London, who visited, wrote about the colony in his 1913 novel *The Valley of the Moon*.

Carmel wasn't just beautiful. The low cost of living gave its residents the freedom to create without having to worry about money. "You could get good [red wine] for two bits a gallon, tubs of beans for next to nothing," Elsie Whitaker Martinez, who lived in Carmel, told an interviewer. "You could go fishing for abalones, mussels, all free—raid orchards and a few things like that. You could get vegetables very cheaply from the Japanese or Chinese and you could live quite comfortably." Early on, Sterling led the colony's shenanigans, which included swimming, hunting, drinking, and "abalone-pounding parties" on the beach. He held pagan rituals in the woods and romanced women despite the presence of his wife, Carrie. He wanted the colony to be full of bohemians, whom he defined "as young, as radical in their outlook on art and life, as unconventional."

In 1908, Alice MacGowan and her sister and writing partner, Grace MacGowan Cooke, moved to Carmel. They bought a two-story house above a beach that today is known as Cooke's Cove. According to Kay Baker Gaston's *California History* article, "The MacGowan Girls," they'd "achieved wide popular success with their novels, short stories, essays, and poems, a success that began as early as 1888 with the publication of Grace's first magazine stories." At ages 50 and 45, the sisters brought clear-eyed professionalism to the bohemian colony. One collaborator, Caroline Wood Morrison, described their process in 1913:

> *They had an office, a stenographer, tables, books of reference. Someone wrote the story first by herself, then laid it out like a subject for the operating table. Paragraph by paragraph they went over it, often cutting whole pages up into puzzle pieces and refitting them—sentence by sentence.... They worked from morning until midnight, stopping only for meals and an afternoon drive. After dinner they read aloud the finished work. Often they would tear up a page, call in the stenographer, redictate it to her and go at something else while she typed it. It was delightful work for me.*

As female writers in the early 20th century, the MacGowan sisters couldn't afford the lifestyle of someone like Sterling, who frolicked on the beach and drank the day away. Growing up in Tennessee, they had begun publishing at a young age. While Grace married and had two daughters, Alice took to adventuring. In 1890, she rode a horse a thousand miles, to the far side of North Carolina's Black Mountains and back, to gather writing material. She was, as one article put it, a "daring personality."

In 1906, Grace left her husband. She, her daughters, and Alice joined Helicon Hall, an experimental community led by Upton Sinclair. With the proceeds from his celebrated book *The Jungle*, Sinclair had purchased a former boys' school in New Jersey. He wanted to create a self-sufficient society based on his interpretation of the philosophies of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, author of the lauded short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." One of the features was free childcare, which must have appealed to Grace. (Another, unfortunate feature: Helicon Hall banned Black and Jewish people from joining.)

Five months in, Helicon Hall burned down, killing one person and injuring 8 of the 70 residents, including the sisters. The night of the fire, Sinclair ran through the building yelling for everyone to evacuate. He heard screams from Alice's room and found the women, terrified but unharmed, in their nightclothes. Sinclair tried to lead them to the stairs, but smoke forced them back into the room. To free them, Sinclair smashed a window with a chair and climbed outside. Then he and three other men stretched a blanket between them as an impromptu trampoline and urged the women and children to jump. The children landed safely, but Grace wasn't so lucky. As Sinclair described it, "being quite a heavy woman, her weight ripped the blanket to pieces and she went through injuring herself very badly." Alice, meanwhile, hit her back on a rock when she fell. The sisters went to the hospital to recover.

After that excitement, Carmel must have seemed like a peaceful new start. However, the artist colony had already had its own share of tragedy during its short history. In 1907, the poet Nora May French killed herself with cyanide in Sterling's house. (He was away at the time.) Her suicide caused a media frenzy as morbid and inaccurate accounts of her death were printed in newspapers nationwide.

So when the poisoned marshmallows appeared in MacGowan's icebox on that April day in 1914, the first impulse was to keep the scandal quiet. The Carmel Development Company, which was run by two businessmen, James Franklin Devendorf and Frank H. Powers, worried that the publicity would ruin the town's reputation. As there was no local government, they maintained the roads and utilities in town, but their interest was in selling real estate, not protecting residents. Thus, they convinced MacGowan not to say anything about the poison. According to Cooke, her sister was "persuaded that her best course was to leave the village quietly, almost furtively, to say as little as she could to friends about the crime and to deny it altogether to newspaper men." By the time the sisters decided to report the crime to the closest police force, the sheriff in neighboring Monterey, they were told it was too late to track down the culprit. The trail was likely cold.

This secrecy was, quite probably, creating a dangerous environment. Earlier that year, there had been several robberies. In one case, $2,000 in diamonds disappeared from the home of Josephine Foster, president of the Carmel Arts and Crafts Club. A local resident, Maud Greeley, was accused of the theft. The *San Francisco Examiner* described Greeley as someone who "formerly worked as a domestic" and now "owns…one of the most artistic cottages in the colony." Strangely, Greeley returned the diamonds to Foster, saying she had found them in her backyard wrapped in newspaper. The case was tried in court, and she was exonerated. The police didn't follow up on that either, or on any of the other thefts that occurred that year.

More troubling, MacGowan may have been threatened more than once. The artist Jennie V. Cannon wrote in her journal on May 26, "On the way I met Alice MacGowan. There have been several attempts to take her life, a strange thing for she is popular with everybody." Cooke wrote in the *San Francisco Call* that "there was a savage and repeated attempt upon the life of my sister."

When other women began receiving threatening letters, it only underlined the perilousness of the situation in Carmel. The sisters left for San Francisco, and Cooke's son-in-law, author Harry Leon Wilson, hired a detective to discover the poisoner. When he came up with nothing, authors in the colony decided to play sleuth. Jimmy Hopper interviewed everyone in town, looking for clues and potential story ideas. "Hopper says he is going to put it all into a book some time," reported one article. Perry Newberry, who later cowrote novels with MacGowan, made a map and noted that MacGowan's and Greeley's houses were next to each other. Other writers, such as Fred Bechdolt and John Kenneth Turner, also looked for clues. Nothing turned up.

Little did they know, things would soon get much worse.

As the summer approached, Carmel was abuzz with the arrival of William Merritt Chase. The well-respected painter opened a summer school in town as a continuation of his prestigious New York and Europe classes. (In fact, it was the last course Chase taught—he died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1916.) On August 12, one of his students, Helena Wood Smith, disappeared.

Smith had lived at the colony for four years. Originally from Maine, she was a teacher at the Carmel Arts and Crafts Club and an accomplished artist who'd exhibited in Boston, San Francisco, and Philadelphia. The last known picture of her, printed in the *San Francisco Examiner*, shows her in class looking on as Chase demonstrates plein air painting. She's matronly, wearing spectacles, with her wavy hair tucked under a flowery hat. Her lips are turned up, half smirking, as she watches Chase work.

She was last seen at 4:30 or 5 p.m. entering her studio with George Kodani, a Japanese American photographer. Her home remained undisturbed, although a check for $252 was missing, and so was her pet spaniel, King. When questioned, Kodani said he had visited Smith to show her some of his photographs. The police released him, and he promptly disappeared. Later, a note was found in the pathway to Smith's house that said, "I am away at San Jose. Please take care of house —HWS." It was thought that Kodani had returned after being questioned and pinned the note to the door but that the wind had blown it off.

Carmel erupted. The anxiety that had been simmering all spring overflowed into outrage. Search parties of novelists and artists roamed the beaches and poked sand dunes with poles, looking for a body. They combed the trails for Kodani. Newspapers followed the progress with breathless sensationalism. "Carmel Posse Hunts Jap in Bandit Cave" reads one headline. The case even made the *New York Times*. A petition spearheaded by Mary Austin and the artist Mary DeNeale Morgan protested the police response: "We feel that the manner in which these cases have been handled to date endangers the safety of all citizens, and particularly of unprotected women." It had 160 signatures.

Considering California's history of anti-Asian racism, it's depressingly predictable that Kodani was vilified and his guilt assumed. Some speculated that Smith's disappearance was related to MacGowan's attempted poisoning—perhaps Kodani was responsible for all of Carmel's problems. "There are many in the literary and artist colony of Carmel who are satisfied that there is a sinister connection between the two crimes," wrote the *Oakland Tribune*.

Kodani was from a prominent local family. His older brother, Gennosuke Kodani, came to California in 1897 on behalf of the Japanese government to establish abalone harvesting. He partnered with the landowner Alexander M. Allan and started the Point Lobos Canning Company. By 1912, he'd developed the modern abalone diving and processing industry in Monterey Bay. The company was responsible for 75 percent of California's abalone market, and its canned goods were sold all over the United States. According to the 1910 census, approximately 1,100 Japanese people lived in Monterey County, mostly in the Salinas Valley. By 1920, the number would increase to 1,600.

An image of George Kodani in the *San Francisco Call* shows him with his pet collie. He's fashionably dressed in trousers, a button-down shirt, suspenders, and a tie. The article, published in August 1914, describes him as "a talented photographer" possessing "esthetic tastes and cultures that won for him an entrance into exclusive homes of Carmel." None of his photos have been found, although his work may have been published in Japanese magazines.

According to Austin, who was determined to save Smith's reputation from associations with the "degenerate" Kodani, he and Smith had known each other since 1912, when, on a sketching trip to Point Lobos, she had offered to critique his work.

They likely had a romantic relationship. How far it went, and how serious it was, is unclear. In 1913, the Japanese poet Takeshi Kanno and his wife, the sculptor Gertrude Boyle Kanno, came to Carmel to put on his play *Creation-Dawn* at the Forest Theater. The striking couple presented a romantic picture of forbidden love to the artist colony. They met at the poet Joaquin Miller's house in Oakland and later wed in Seattle because California banned interracial marriages. This racist law had been expanded in 1905 to include marriages between white and Japanese people, a situation that would have affected Kodani and Smith.

At the time, Kodani was pursuing more than one romance. The *San Francisco Call* printed love letters found in his trunk that he had written to three women other than Smith. "When I learned that Blanche is gone, my heart is as if it got broken," went one. "I could not work; I just walked up and down. Oh, but my heart is still full of love." In a poem, Kodani wrote, "Kiss me, sweetheart, the spring is

here, / And love is lord of you and me."

Romantic talk was the norm in Carmel, where men were inclined toward womanizing behavior. George Sterling was notorious for seducing women and even kept a San Francisco apartment for his liaisons. When he met Mary Craig Kimbrough, who later married Upton Sinclair, he dropped to his knees and declared, "Goddess!" Sterling wrote her so many sonnets that she published a book of his poetry after he died. So did another Carmel woman, Vera Connolly, whom Sterling had gotten pregnant (she either miscarried or had an abortion). Sterling's behavior was extreme but also indicative of the early culture of Carmel. When it comes to love letters, Kodani was behaving in line with men of his milieu.

On August 22, 10 days after Smith disappeared, Kodani was arrested. Monterey County sheriff William Nesbitt said he used a "secret agent" to coax him out of hiding. It was likely Kodani's brother, believes fisheries historian Tim Thomas.

"He took off into the hills above Point Lobos, and it was Gennosuke Kodani who found him and convinced him to give himself up," Thomas says.

According to Robert W. Edwards's book *Jennie V. Cannon: The Untold History of the Carmel and Berkeley Art Colonies*, the police worried about violence against Kodani. "Sedate Carmel had suddenly become carnivorous," writes Edwards. "Monterey authorities...quickly dispatched Kodani under heavy guard to the County Prison in Salinas, thereby foiling the rumored 'lynching mob' that was gathering in Carmel."

Kodani claimed that he and Smith had taken a nighttime walk on the beach, where they fought about whether they should marry. Sometime during this fight, Kodani said, Smith fell—or jumped—off a cliff into the bay. Many believed that Kodani had tried to rob Smith and killed her in the process. However, the motive of theft was contradicted by the fact that valuables had been left lying in her cabin, including a diamond ring. Kodani admitted that Smith had given him $252 to rent a studio in nearby Pacific Grove; when he was unable to cash the check, he destroyed it.

The next day, Fred Bechdolt, the author of many western novels, led a search near the mouth of the Carmel River and discovered Smith's body in a shallow grave. She'd been strangled and wrapped in a rug. The rope was still around her throat, and gold jewelry was on her body. The autopsy revealed that she'd been bashed in the face with a blunt object hard enough to break her nose. At this point, Kodani confessed to killing Smith.

The trial, which happened in October, was quick, only a few days long, and the stakes were high. Since Kodani had confessed, guilt was assumed, and the jury would decide between life in prison and the death penalty. It's unlikely Kodani received a fair trial: he didn't have a lawyer during the preliminary hearing, for example, and tampered evidence—a pair of Smith's broken spectacles—was presented in court. The *Salinas Daily Index* reported that "a vast crowd of spectators, more than half ladies, thronged the courtroom, overflowing into the corridor, the judge's chamber and the jury room" as Kodani took the stand and admitted to killing Smith, but on accident.

On the day in question, he said, he had gone to Smith's house to show her negatives of his latest photographs. At some point, he stepped outside and Smith snooped in his jacket pockets, finding another woman's letter and photograph. When he came back, she was furious and they fought. According to the *Monterey Daily Cypress*, Kodani said that

> *[Smith] picked up a large abalone shell and struck him, the blow being received on the shoulder. He finally took the shell away from her and the woman then grasped him by the collar. Kodani now lost his temper and slapped Miss Smith with the shell an indefinite number of times. She commenced to scream and he tried to stifle her cries with his hand but she bit him.... Becoming excited he took a piece of cord which he had brought with him...and tied it about her throat. The woman sank to the floor.*

Once he realized what he'd done, Kodani said, he wrapped Smith in a rug and buried her in the sand. He also killed her dog so it wouldn't lead anyone to the body.

Two versions of what had happened emerged during the trial: either Kodani and Smith's lovers' quarrel had led to manslaughter, or Kodani was a thief who had ingratiated himself with Smith to rob and murder her. The jury ultimately sided with the first version and sentenced Kodani to life in prison.

The press was outraged. "The fiendish murderer," editorialized the *Salinas Daily Index*, "richly deserves hanging and should thank his stars that his attorneys...saved him from the gallows." In the courtroom, the judge expressed similar sentiments in an "awful excoriation" of the jury, saying that Kodani "deserved to be hung." Saved from death, he was sent to Folsom State Prison, where he spent the next 32 years of his life. He was granted parole in 1946.

"In the Kodani family, he is completely erased," says Thomas. "It's like he didn't exist. And when Helena's family came from Maine to pick up the body, the entire Japanese community met them in the train station in Monterey and took them all around, got them what they needed, and made sure they were taken care of."

Carmel didn't show the same decency to the Japanese community. According to Edwards, many residents boycotted Japanese products and labor after Kodani's conviction. "The blatant racism in the press and among many of the Carmel gentry in 1914 was and remains unforgivable," he writes. "Equally unforgivable was the deliberate isolation of the Japanese community in Carmel in the months following." By 1915, much of the Japanese population had moved away from Carmel.

The case of the poisoned marshmallows was never solved. The MacGowan sisters returned to the colony in 1915, and there were no more attempts on Alice's life. Afterward, the city incorporated, established a government, and accepted the presence of a marshal. The publicity from the crimes didn't ruin the area's reputation as the Carmel Development Company had feared. In fact, more people moved to town, and mansions began appearing above the beaches.

Like a true professional writer, Alice MacGowan used the situation for story fodder. In 1921, she and Perry Newberry—who would later be elected mayor of Carmel—collaborated on *The Million-Dollar Suitcase*. This Bay Area–set mystery novel is narrated by a hard-boiled detective named Jerry Boyne, predating Dashiell Hammett's *Thin Man* series by over a decade. The detective is aided by Barbara Wallace, who, like Sherlock Holmes, has a genius for deductive reasoning. While the novel sags with stereotypes of women and Asian people, it was a hit in its time. MacGowan and Newberry went on to write a series together based on the book.

While *The Million-Dollar Suitcase* doesn't directly reference the crimes of 1914, elements of that summer seep into the story. The mystery starts when a criminal walks out of a bank with a million dollars in, well, a suitcase. The bank, fearing publicity, decides it's better to "keep this thing to ourselves" and hires a detective to track down the thief. Then a prominent person in Santa Ysobel, a fictional Carmel, suddenly dies. The suicide—or is it murder?—is kindling to the community, which harbors an unexplained darkness beneath its beautiful facade. Investigating the crime "means a stirring to the depths of that little town," the detective says. "This underneath-the-surface combustion will get poked into a flame—she's going to burst out, and somebody's going to get burned." ■

Joy Lanzendorfer is the author of the novel Right Back Where We Started From, *whose paperback edition was published in August. Her* Alta Journal *article "Flight of the Condors" received third-place honors from the 2022 SoCal Journalism Awards.*

FAST & FURIOUS

By David Wolman • *Illustrations by* Mark Smith

NO PITY

In Portland, a band of fed-up citizens are fighting back against car thieves and chop shops. They'll step in where law enforcement can't and do repos on behalf of crime victims.

The man carrying the gasoline was nicknamed What-the-Fuck Chuck. Not that a sobriquet is necessarily an indicator of one's judgment or lack thereof, especially here in Portland, where open-minded people like Paul Regan are disinclined to judge. But then Regan noticed the lit cigarette in Chuck's other hand and thought: *Holy crap. Is finding this car really worth it?*

Of course it was. The car, a 1981 Chevy Camaro, was Regan's treasure. White with thick green stripes running over the hood and back, the car was an homage to Portland's Major League Soccer team, the Timbers. Emblazoned across the Camaro's tail in bold capital letters were the words "NO PITY," short for "No Pity in the Rose City," a rallying cry of hardcore Timbers fans like Regan. The only thing that could have made this car more quintessentially Portland would have been to wrap it in bacon.

One morning last May, Regan's wife looked out the window of the couple's home in Northeast Portland and didn't see the Camaro. "She asked me where I'd parked it," Regan told me recently. "Right out front," he replied, wondering if she might be pulling his leg. She wasn't. NO PITY had been stolen.

Regan, a hairstylist who looks a little like Denis Leary, called the cops, but the short-staffed Portland Police Bureau was too swamped to do anything. An officer suggested Regan post about the theft on social media. He started with Nextdoor, despite the platform's reputation for bigotry, paranoia, sanctimony, and all-around awfulness. As if on cue, someone responded that they found it inappropriate to write "NO PITY" on the car, because it's important to have compassion for others.

Regan also shared the news about the car on two Facebook Group pages where users congregate to help people get their cars back, sharing pictures of missing vehicles or parked cars that look fishy for some reason or another: missing plates, "rattle can" paint job, make and model matching a stolen-car alert, a nice car parked in a shitty place, vehicle identification number tag removed, wheels off and the back seat full of trash and a sleeping bag.

In the first few days after the theft, Regan heard of various possible sightings. Under a bridge near downtown was one. Another was at a park overlooking the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers. But follow-up searches led nowhere, and soon the scent went cold. Losing hope, Regan began spending his free time driving around with a friend, peering into car lots and alleyways. At one point, he stopped to ask a garbage collector to keep an eye out for his beloved Camaro.

Then on June 1, one of the group members from Facebook contacted Regan with news: according to footage surreptitiously captured by a drone, his Camaro, not to mention a bunch of other cars, was in an abandoned lot—occupied by homeless people—just below the railroad tracks in the St. Johns neighborhood, north of downtown. A recovery specialist was already on his way there with backup.

Regan drove a rental to St. Johns. On the scene, he was met by three men: The group's de facto leader, Nick Haas, was a mechanic with a wild long beard who rides a Harley, wears leather, and boasts about his various firearms. The other two men were Frank Donaldson, an employee at a local paint store who had befriended Haas on a previous recovery mission, and Chuck Burleson, a.k.a. WTF Chuck.

Haas, one of Portland's most active stolen-car hunters, had already scouted the location. "I realized I had stumbled into something *huge*," he later recalled. After seeing at least 20 partially stripped cars and other vehicles, he called the police; there had been two shootings in the area earlier in the year, and Haas told me he didn't want to take chances. But when the officers arrived, they explained that they could only wait nearby because the cars in question were on private property. Haas and his friends were on their own.

Regan didn't know any of these people, and wasn't inclined to march into a homeless encampment–cum–chop shop to demand his property. But his love for the Camaro was powerful. He wanted it back, and these men were volunteering to help. If they didn't go in now, the car might be cut to pieces and lost forever.

Grabbing the canister of gasoline, WTF Chuck said to Regan, "Stay close." That was when Regan noticed the cigarette in Chuck's left hand. Suppressing his survival instinct, Regan followed the impromptu posse down the muddy embankment and into the world of Portland's cut-rate dark knights.

No need to sugarcoat it: these past few years have been tough on Portland. The city is still suffering from PTSD following the riots of 2020, when peaceful protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder were co-opted by a small but rabid faction that clashed nightly with police, federal agents, and right-wing counterprotesters. That September, smoke from devastating wildfires gave the city a *Blade Runner* pall. A year later, still more fires and smoke, followed by the terrifying heat dome that killed dozens of people. Stir into that cauldron the pandemic, an intractable homelessness crisis, and related problems like drug addiction. Is it any wonder that people here are stealing cars in record numbers?

In the years preceding COVID, the Portland Police Bureau reported close to 7,000 motor vehicle thefts a year. Big numbers, but in 2021 the figure jumped to 9,061. By October 2022, when the bureau last updated its count, thefts were on track to top 10,000 by year's end—including one bookmobile.

At the same time, Portland's police force has been gutted, although it is starting to rebound. In 2020, calls to defund the police spurred the city council to reduce the force by nearly 100 sworn officers, from 1,001 to 916. That reduction was followed by a wave of attrition, leaving the bureau with 772 officers by May 2022. These shortfalls mean workload triage, which means deprioritizing stolen-property crimes.

Yet out of this disheartening milieu, an unexpected and controversial force for good has emerged. A growing band of frustrated, altruistic, risk-taking, tech-savvy, and sometimes just plain bored citizens have joined together to form a ragtag army. Convening online and IRL, thousands of people are working to reunite owners with their stolen cars. If you have a missing-vehicle problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find them, maybe you can turn to…some random people on Facebook.

One morning last fall, I hopped out of a Lyft at the corner of Lombard Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Northeast Portland. Trucks zoomed past as I stood on the littered sidewalk beside a sketchy motel and across from a run-down gas station and a Jack in the Box. This is the other Portland, the part I saw but didn't see during my 16 years of living here. The part with no taxidermy-adorned hipster coffee shops, no art galleries or sleek offices for green businesses, no twee bike shops tailor-made for the *New York Times* travel section. Just an economically depressed swatch of an American city like any other.

I was waiting for Sara Jane, a stolen-vehicle-recovery artist bordering on savant. To date, Jane (not her real name) has recovered or helped recover roughly 900 cars and trucks. Our plan had been to meet up and ride around town, maybe cruise past some hot spots for thievery while talking along the way. But then I received a hurried text message:

> *Meet me*
> *Going for a truck [I've] been chasing*
> *Mlk and Lombard*

About 30 minutes later, when I texted to say I had arrived, she sent a photo of a dilapidated black Ford F-250.

> *Is that there?*

It wasn't.

Jane drove up suddenly behind me in a scratched gray Mitsubishi mini-SUV. After a half-second greeting, she started firing off facts about the F-250 in question—where it was last seen, where else we could look for it, new intel other members of the group had posted. She thought of the Jubitz truck stop and gas station just up the road, a place where she had found stolen vehicles in the past, so we took off in that direction.

Born and raised in Portland, Jane is 40, with straight brown hair and large kind eyes. She recently left her job at Costco after eight years and now picks up part-time gigs like delivering for DoorDash or working security at event venues. She smokes, laughs easily, and is dizzyingly fast when it comes to scrolling, posting, and messaging.

Jane's childhood was a portrait of instability. Her mother struggled with addiction, and Jane bounced around to different homes, different schools. When she got pregnant at 15, she resolved to care for the child, she told me, to give her daughter a good home and prove that she wasn't just like her mother.

Today, Jane has two adult daughters, a 13-year-old son, and two grandchildren who are just about the only things that can distract her from her primary occupation, which isn't exactly an occupation so much as it is an unpaid pursuit that consumes most of her waking hours: hunting stolen cars. "Once you get that recovery under your skin, it's like a drug," she said.

Some days, Jane stays busy with dot-connecting online—linking alerts about stolen vehicles to pictures of suspicious cars and trucks, updating threads about searches underway, fielding incoming tips from group members, or liaising with police. But she prefers to be on the street. "I kind of feel like chasing this truck is driving me insane," she said as we headed west on Columbia Boulevard. "I don't really like going after one particular thing."

She usually spends hours driving slowly through the city and its outskirts, snapping photographs of license plates, noting abandoned cars, and seeing which homeless camps have been cleaned out, only to resprout a block away. It's about patterns, she explained: "How vehicles are parked, where they're parked, the style, the make, the telltale signs." If she stops to get out for an inspection, she's thinking, "Is the ignition busted? Is there a window broken? Is it left unlocked?" Because these days around Portland, she said, if it's unlocked, chances are it's stolen.

At one point during our morning together, Jane spotted a pair of license plates sitting in the bushes. She stopped to retrieve them, then used the app Bumper to confirm that they were from a car that had been reported stolen the previous day. (She later handed them over to the police.) A few minutes later, we came upon an area she described as a "clusterfuck of vehicles." "This is where I get my camera so I look less obvious," she said, clicking her phone into a dash-mounted holder.

But Jane's real superpower—or, depending on your point of view, ill-advised specialty—is that she is unafraid to walk up to people anywhere in the city and start talking to them about cars or, if no one is there, to open a door and nose around for clues, like a discarded envelope that might reveal the true owner's identity. "I just do things that most people don't," she said. I asked whether this was even legal. "I mean, it depends on who you ask." If the car is already stolen, who's going to complain about her trespass?

She calls her strategy "recovery with kindness," and it's rooted in compassion for people on the street, the vast majority of whom aren't stealing cars. Sometimes she will make up a story about Grandma's lost poodle. Conjuring tears, she asks to look around a little. In other cases, she is straightforward, explaining that she's not a cop and has no interest in other people's business—all she wants is her friend's car back. *Can we just take care of this and keep the police out of it?* This approach usually works, she told me, and although she carries mace for emergencies, she's convinced that she is safer because of the fact that she's a woman alone. "People aren't threatened. And they want to help," she said.

Lino Pavon, an officer who has been with Portland's East Precinct for more than a decade and who has developed a working relationship with the stolen-car-recovery crowd, is impressed with Jane's investigative efforts and diplomacy. "She talks to people that normally would run from me," Pavon said, gesturing toward his uniform and bulletproof vest. Not all of the police force is in favor of this vigilantism, but Pavon's superiors support it enough that he was given the green light to download the Facebook Messenger app onto his work phone so that he can be in better touch with the car-recovery community.

The reasons for Jane's commitment to the cause are unclear. "I hate the word *vigilante*," she said. It has a certain connotation, she explained—"guns and testosterone and all that." Whatever she chooses to call this pastime, it's clear that the drive to help people like Regan find their vehicles has grown into a full-blown obsession. "Those are people I want to help, and I will not stop," she said.

But there are risks. Car recovery may be a hobby, but so is bowling. "I do worry, because things can go sideways," Pavon said. Although many of the cars that these volunteers find are unoccupied, that's not always the case. "You never know who those people are," he said, referring to car thieves. "I've made countless arrests of people who were wanted for Measure 11 crimes"—assault, rape, murder—"and those criminals are often in stolen vehicles."

To illustrate the point, Pavon recounted an episode when Jane had driven into a homeless camp and, from the sparse information he received, it sounded as if she had been boxed in and wasn't able to leave. She messaged him, but he and his partner had been dispatched on another call. "I couldn't jump in the car and drive over there to help her," he said. He eventually managed to get officers from a different precinct to race to the scene. They couldn't find Jane at first and were reluctant to enter the camp. "There was a shooting there the night before," Pavon said.

"Then the next thing I know, she's texting me back: *Oh, yeah. We're cool. We're good.*" Jane had cast her kindness spell. The people in the camp even helped her fix a tire and get her car unstuck. There's no question that she's daring, Pavon said. "And crazy, too."

Jane isn't dismissive of the dangers. "Yes, I could get shot. Yes, I could get hurt. Yes, I might fuck someone over, the wrong person, and they might come after me. But this could all happen at 7-Eleven, too," she said. With every recovery, she continued, "I'm bringing joy to somebody's life. I'm changing somebody's life. Why would I want to stop doing that, you know?" Besides, there's something liberating about her choice. "I've dedicated my whole life to doing what people felt I needed to do," she said. "And finally, at 40 years old, I just kind of middle-fingered the world and said, 'I'm going to do what I want to do.'"

One morning in May last year, Jane was scrolling through the PNW Stolen Cars page (or maybe it was the sister page, PDX Stolen Cars) when she saw Regan's post about the kidnapped Camaro. "There are cars that really stand out," she said, and this was obviously one of them. "Everyone wanted to get that car back."

A few weeks later, Jane heard from one of her favorite, albeit secretive, contacts. The man wrote with a tip about the Camaro's whereabouts. More than a tip: aerial reconnaissance. Drone footage had captured what was unmistakably the Camaro, nestled in a stand of tall trees in the neighborhood of St. Johns. (For her contact's safety, Jane declined to connect us. "*Maybe I'm drone dude*," she messaged me. She was joking. I think.)

Jane went into overdrive trying to reach Regan—via phone, direct messages, his wife, his workplace—but she couldn't get through. Time was of the essence; she had seen too often how a found stolen car can vanish again. But St. Johns was far from her home turf. And while she's daring, she isn't stupid. If this encampment was as large and secluded as it appeared on her screen, she didn't want to go in there. Not alone, anyway.

She did know someone, though, who was up to the task—fired up, even. His style made her bristle: he was a swaggering tough guy whose demeanor struck Jane as unsafe and contrary to the idea of earning the trust of people who live on the street. "I go in with honey; he goes in with vinegar," she said.

Yet there was no denying his effectiveness. He had an active network of friends willing to help with recoveries, he knew the city as well as anyone, the cops knew him, and he was unafraid of pretty much everything. Jane had the NO PITY Camaro in her sights, and she was not going to lose it. So she shelved her misgivings and called Nick Haas.

The scene in the forested pocket below Midway Avenue in St. Johns was like something out of *Mad Max*, but substitute dense forest for desert sun. Cars and stripped cars and tires and parts and oil and trash and clothes and scrap wood strewn everywhere. Imagine a miniature shantytown, with as many semipermanent structures as there were tents. Haas later estimated that there were 40, perhaps 50 cars there, all in "various states of dismemberment." In the niche treasure-hunting world of stolen-car recovery, this was the mother lode.

Haas switched his phone to video function and tucked it into the breast pocket of his biker jacket, then began recording and narrating as if he were entering a safe house in Abbottabad. He poked his head into a red Chevy truck and pulled a Sawzall blade—often used to start a stolen car without a key—out of the ignition. He wandered past a plywood structure that looked like an outhouse, then along a path through the undergrowth leading to a cluster of torn-apart Subarus and other cars.

When he spied the Camaro, he snapped a quick photograph. At this point, Regan and Jane were still on their way to St. Johns. Jane's phone buzzed with a message from Haas—it was the picture of the Camaro.

Jane texted back: *You crazy fucker.*

Haas: *There are 20 cars here!!!! Calling 911.*

Eventually, a woman caught up to Haas, asking what he was doing, why he was snooping around. She was clearly distressed by an apparent show of force. "You don't need to cock a gun in my fucking face," she said. (If he had threatened her with a gun, the moment was not captured by Haas's makeshift body cam. If he hadn't, how did she know he was armed?)

"Fuck off," Haas replied.

"Don't come in here and treat me like I did something fucking wrong," the woman shouted.

"Shut your cock holster," Haas replied.

"I'm trying to fucking fix this shit," she said.

"Well, then you're doing a great fucking job," Haas replied.

He kept walking with his back to the woman, focused on his mission. She yelled after him: "Fuck you! Fuck you, and fuck you, too!"

"Bye, hooker," he called back.

In Haas's retelling—and a witness confirmed his account—it was at that moment that a Jeep Cherokee with two men inside came "roaring" out of nowhere and nearly hit him. He jumped sideways just in time, then took out his pocketknife and began slashing tires.

Outnumbered, Haas was about to shout for WTF Chuck or Donaldson when he heard "Nick—look out!" He turned and saw a man coming at him holding a pipe aloft, ready to swing.

Nick Haas grew up in Salem, Oregon, and moved to Portland in 2010 to pursue his dreams of being a professional musician. He earned some OK money playing gigs at local clubs and running a concert venue, but then he became a dad. His income from music was too inconsistent, whereas fixing cars and bikes—something he'd always had a knack for—was more stable.

His first vehicle recovery was in 2021, and it was a 1980 Harley-Davidson. Once owner and bike were reunited, Haas listened as the man, overjoyed, began calling his friends to tell them he had gotten it back. "It was like watching somebody hold their child for the first time or seeing a loved one after some horrific tragic event," Haas said. From that day on, he was hooked. Here was something he could do to genuinely help others, the city, and its overburdened police force. "Everyone screams 'Abolish the police!' Well, if we want to abolish the police, we're going to have to police ourselves," he said.

Haas, who is 34, spends considerable time talking about two things: the dysfunction of modern society due to scourges like addiction and Nick Haas adventures in ass kicking. Like the time last year when security cameras at his repair shop picked up two thieves trying to steal catalytic converters from vehicles parked on his lot. Haas blasted them with a shotgun loaded with rock salt—"Boom, right in the face. Boom, right in the ass," he said in a YouTube video.

Then there was the time he walked up to two men in a car that he knew was stolen. "They're sitting there with a plate covered in crystal meth, a huge pile," Haas said. "I pulled my pistol out and put it right in the window and said, 'I'm going to count to five, and if I can still see you guys, I'm going to shoot you both in the ass.' I started counting out loud. They took their gigantic plate of methamphetamine and went running down the street, spilling it the whole way."

Perhaps not surprisingly, Haas is a hit with local television, with his steampunk glasses, leather biker gear, and polished sound bites criticizing the status quo and calling on his fellow citizens to take back their city. A reporter named Elise Haas (no relation) was on the scene after a recovery last summer and told viewers, "I was the first to tell you about how Nick Haas had helped recover his 50th stolen vehicle. Today he has now hit *200* vehicles recovered. And he's inspiring more people in Portland to help."

In another TV segment, Nick Haas says to the camera, "I feel like if I can lead by example, more people will start stepping up and doing the kind of things that I'm doing, and eventually these guys [thieves] will start to realize this isn't a good idea anymore." The local media coverage is heavy on adulation, light on underlying problems, and mum on vigilantism's potential downsides, what it says about a society.

When I met Haas last October, he had fallen on hard times; he was being evicted from his shop for failing to make payments. He didn't really know what was next but also said he wasn't going to let up on his recovery efforts. People need hope right now, he said. "I'll eat Top Ramen and be broke. It's worth it. I'm sure Mother Teresa wasn't a rich person, not that I would ever compare myself to her."

His family is proud of what he's been doing but worries that he's going to get hurt. Yet as Haas sees it, addressing this problem—not just stolen cars but the frayed social fabric that leads to symptoms like addiction, homelessness, and car theft—is about more than personal risk. "The danger of what I choose to do, the risk of being shot by some petty thief high on methamphetamine, doesn't scare me more or bother me as much as the fact that this situation exists," he said. "I just wish there were more people who had the ability to say 'Fuck it' and do what I'm doing."

Pavon, the officer who has worked closely with Portland's recovery enthusiasts, is sympathetic toward fed-up citizens like Haas. "They're taking matters into their own hands because they see little response on our end," he said, referring to both the police and city government. At the same time, Pavon urges caution. "I've suggested many times that this is not a good idea. You should probably not do that, you should probably not go after those people, you should probably not go into a camp. But I can't be responsible for their actions," he said. "I can't stop them from doing what they're going to do."

And then there is the matter of mission creep. "We've even done some bigger things," Haas told me, "like cleaning up the neighborhood. We were dealing with the taggers. We were dealing with the thieves. We were dealing with people breaking into cars." One house near his shop was a constant source of complaints and concern; Haas said the inhabitants were selling heroin, fentanyl, and meth out of the basement.

So he got a crew together and drove to the house with a U-Haul truck. "We took them out of there. We took all their belongings, put it all in boxes. We drove it clear out to Troutdale, Oregon, and put it all in a storage unit. We told them it's paid for three months. Don't come back," he said. "Then we spent the next two weeks running off every junkie and addicted heroin user and cleaning up needles and garbage and burnt pieces of tinfoil."

More recently, Haas has been posting about a notorious motorcycle thief in town nicknamed Blackbird because of a crow tattoo just below his right eye. In one online forum, motorcycle enthusiasts hinted that if Blackbird were to lose all his fingers, "that would be a terrible shame." To Haas, none of this amounts to vigilantism. "A lot of what I do, according to the black-and-white lettering in the law of federal or state or county—however you want to phrase it—is illegal," he explained. He claimed that officers frequently tell him, "What you're doing isn't legal. But it's what's right."

Inspired by the attention he has gained from recoveries and media coverage, Haas now dreams of spinning up an organization that does good and helps him pay his bills. The working title is Guardians Theft Recovery, and the idea is to have a bunch of loaner cars available to share with theft victims at no charge. If a stolen car is found, GTR will fix it, employing veterans, former addicts, and former inmates. If it's not found, the victim gets to keep the loaner, no strings attached. It would be a way to push back a little, he told me. Not a remedy, but something.

When Haas saw the man with the pipe, he quickly pulled out his .45 and fired a shot into the sky. "Back off. I *will* defend myself," he said. Onlookers fled into the trees, but the man with the pipe and the driver of the Jeep held their ground.

Hearing the gunshot, the officers parked at the top of Midway Avenue no longer had to hold back. It was time to intervene.

They managed to defuse the situation, which didn't take much because Haas immediately identified himself, detailed what had happened, and said he had a permit for his firearm. The police brokered a truce and even got Haas to promise to pay for the slashed tires, which he did, knowing full well the police would never follow up.

The officers nevertheless confiscated Haas's pistol, which he found—and still finds—infuriating. But he wasn't ready to leave the site. There was work to be done, cars on Haas's "personal list" that he wanted to drive out of there, chief among them the NO PITY Camaro.

Haas and his crew were preparing to drive the car out of the camp when Regan finally showed up at the scene. As instructed by Haas, who had texted him when he'd first spotted the Camaro, Regan had two canisters of gasoline with him. It was finally time to rescue his baby.

"When I first saw it, I was like *fuuuuck*," Regan recalled. NO PITY was covered in filth, needed tires, a battery, and gas, and had suffered a few other bumps and bruises, but it was otherwise intact. They salvaged some nearby wheels, and Haas was eventually able to get the engine running. But the car was also trapped in a muddy corner of the overgrown lot and needed to be pulled out. Regan lay on the ground in the leaves and muck to hook a tow cable to NO PITY so they could use a winch to extract it.

By this point, Jane had arrived at Midway but decided to stay uphill, away from the camp and possible conflict. A few minutes later, she watched the Camaro come thundering up the hill with Haas behind the wheel. The car was smoking and spitting mud, but it was alive and finally free from its captors. A few months later, Haas and some friends put together a video about the whole episode, complete with a soundtrack of—what else?—David Bowie's "Heroes."

It was a joyous scene that day in St. Johns, especially for Regan, who was high-fiving everyone. He kept thanking Haas and the others. They didn't want to be paid, but they said they'd accept tips, so Regan gave them the money he had in his wallet, maybe $100. Then he turned to Jane. "I think you're an angel. Thank you, thank you, thank you!" he said. After that, the group posed beside the car for a photograph.

The tires they had scrounged to drive the car back up onto the road weren't safe for travel, so after everyone left, Regan and a friend waited for a tow service to arrive. While they were sitting beside the Camaro, one of the officers came over, thinking they were part of the Facebook group of recovery specialists. "Hey, have you seen a black Firebird?" he asked. One had just been reported stolen. ■

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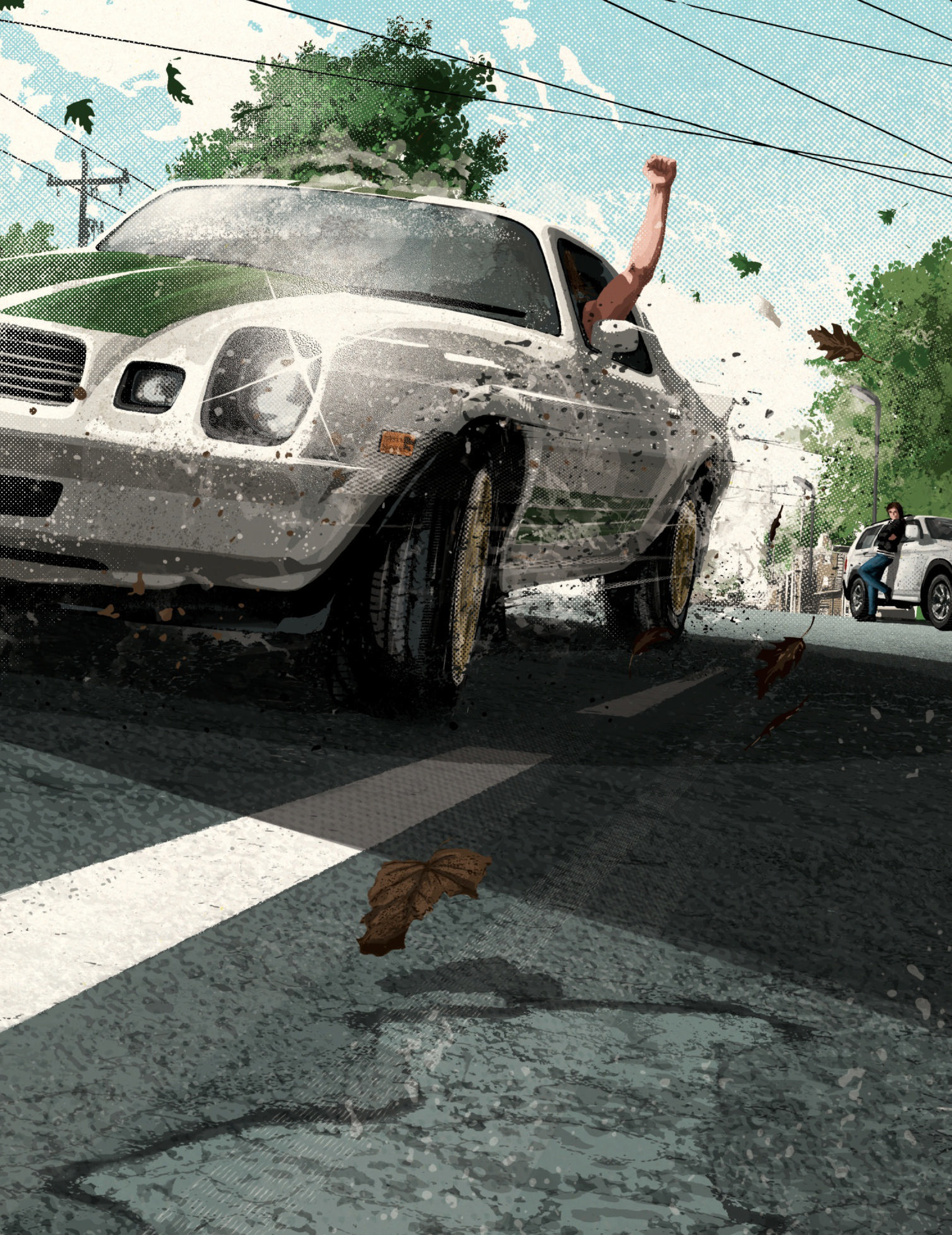


By Geoffrey Gray • *Illustrations by* Hokyoung Kim

THE BULLFIGHTER DRAWS HER SWORD

In her quest to become the first matadora in modern Spain, 23-year-old Honey Anne Haskin gave the performance of a lifetime.

In the bullring, she twisted at the waist, stretched both hamstrings, and rolled her right wrist to loosen it up. She had broken her wrist almost two years earlier, and it still had not healed properly. The pain flared up every time she rolled the palillo, her wooden helper sword, or when her estoque, her steel killing sword, was deflected by a bull's shoulder bone. She tried to kill with her left hand, but the sword was difficult to maneuver and her accuracy was terrible.

"Señoras y señores," came the blast of the loudspeaker, though the sound systems in portable bullrings like the one that afternoon in Móstoles, a suburb on the outskirts of Madrid, were so poor that it was impossible to hear the names of the bullfighters and the ranches and the programming of the feria, the town's annual festival.

Honey Anne Haskin, then 23, was one of the youngest novilleras—aspiring female bullfighters—on the program and set to perform last. Appearing as Ana de Los Angeles, she was said to be the first American woman to perform in a bullring on foot in Spain. She was also the participant with perhaps the most unlikely story. Haskin had grown up an artsy teenage photographer in Los Angeles. There were no ranchers or matadors in her family. No uncles from the Romani neighborhoods of Andalucía or the dusty pueblos of Colombia or Mexico. She had learned Spanish just a few years earlier. But she was a rebellious kid who had bypassed college and taught herself how to fight a bull, and she was in the running to become the first matadora de toros in modern Spanish history.

She now stood tall in her secondhand traje de luces, the ceremonial suit of lights, with its gladiator jacket and skintight pants. She looked at the crowd with a stoic gaze, no makeup and a thin set of eyebrows, thin lips, and thin hair combed tight under her montera, the black silk bullfighter's cap. Other novilleras were warming up next to her, a blur of capes and banderillas, or barbed sticks, and swords.

Haskin had appeared with Carmela from Zaragoza and Carmen Granada and Tencha Maria before. In the late 1970s, novilleras often performed together. Maria, a native of Madrid and the hometown favorite that afternoon, had become Haskin's rival. At a prior performance, Maria had squared off against a bull that was tricky, obscenely large, and older than advertised. She could not finish the performance and was sent to the infirmary. Haskin was obligated to step in. Maria's bull slammed Haskin against the tablas, the wooden boards lining the ring, nearly impaling her with its rack of horns before she killed it. Haskin remained in the ring to face her own bull afterward. This one was dangerous too, older and not appropriate for an amateur. There were moments during this event when Haskin thought she might die. Afterward, Haskin's mother was furious with the promoter.

"How dare you give my daughter bulls like that?" she screamed like a protective parent lacing into an intramural ref over a bad call.

"Come on, Mom," Haskin said, shrugging and pulling her away. She was a bullfighter, not a child. But her mom was right. The bulls had been too big and powerful. Her body ached for days from the thrashing, and she watched the point of the horn slash through her traje de luces like a scalpel.

Now, months later in Móstoles, Haskin had recovered, growing braver and more experienced with every performance. She had struggled with her weight but was exercising every day, testing out a juice diet, and feeling her best.

As the band struck up the first paso doble from the cheap seats, she scanned the crowd. Yes, her mother was there. Even though others in her family thought that moving to Mexico and Spain to become a bullfighter was unladylike and a foolish career choice, her mother had always supported her. They were living together in Madrid, sharing a crowded low-rent apartment with a Portuguese American family with five kids. The youngest three had come to see her perform. As she gazed around for more familiar faces, the toril gate swung open. The first bull of the afternoon was out and loose in the ring.

Haskin had driven there with her cuadrilla, or band of helpers, earlier that afternoon. Her capes, tailored traje de luces, montera, pink stockings, and zapatillas were all carefully wrapped in cloth. She couldn't afford the leather-bound case that wealthier novilleras would have used to transport their ornate clothing. Only her swords were nestled in leather-bound sheaths. Everything was packed in the back of a station wagon. Previously, the cuadrilla was led by Paco Guerra, an old banderillero, a helper who placed the barbed sticks into the withers of the bull, and who had managed Haskin. But she managed herself now.

It was early September, late in the bullfighting season of 1977. The Spanish Falangists had lost their grip on power; a governmental ban prohibiting women from fighting bulls on foot had recently been overturned. The profession's sexist barriers were crumbling, women's liberation movements were gaining momentum, and a growing number of aspirants like Haskin were flocking to Spain.

It was a dangerous dream. The lure of fame and paydays and good bulls was irresistible for the novilleras, but many of them were unprepared and lacked experience. Even two- and three-year-old bulls can weigh a thousand pounds, and learning to handle their speed, sudden movements, and power can take a lifetime.

Nevertheless, the novelty of a woman in the ring could sell tickets. Already, Paco Rodriguez, a Spanish promoter, was putting together a troupe of novilleras. They were good-looking, talented, and ready for bookings. Many, like Alicia Tomás, the nervy and gorgeous actor from Barcelona, were stepping into the ring alongside picadors on horseback, to face three-year-old bulls. New training and business opportunities for women were opening up across the bullfighting world. Soon the moment would arrive when a novillera would be invited to take the alternativa, face full-size bulls on foot, and become the first matadora de toros in modern Spanish history.

> Haskin had fought hard to be here. To get a booking. To get paid. To stand in front of a cow on a ranch, to take a few passes.

Haskin wanted to be the one.

In Móstoles, the plaza was full, and Haskin was on the corrida poster: "Art and Bravery are her qualities, from Los Angeles, United States." The poster was plastered everywhere around the town, which now resembled a fairground, with bands playing and the streets mobbed.

Haskin and her sword handler found their way to an address near the bullring. The promoter of the event had recruited a local family to give Haskin a room in their house to shower and prepare.

Haskin followed her host into a modest bedroom, where she laid out her equipment and wardrobe. Her sword handler then started the elaborate process of helping her dress in her traje de luces, an outfit so old that the gold from the brocade had faded to copper. At least this worn, secondhand suit of lights fit her better than the ones she had rented in the past. Those had been made for men. They weren't big enough in the hips. The jackets were too boxy in the shoulders. The bibs of the taleguillas were too tight. The majority of these costumes, like every other element of the spectacle, were not made with women in mind. It was not the mundo de toro, she often thought. It was the mundo de hombre.

No matter. Haskin had fought hard to be there. To get a booking. To get paid. To stand in front of a cow on a ranch, to take a few passes. Soon, she thought, she would book enough performances to have her own traje made. In an envelope, she kept clippings of the bordadas, their golden threaded patterns, and colors she loved most. Tobacco and gold. Wine and gold. One day soon. As she laced up her blouse for the performance in Móstoles, she knew that behind every button lay a sacrifice.

She had left Los Angeles as a teenager several years after her parents' divorce. Her mother had been an actor, on contract at 20th Century Fox, and struggled to earn enough to support her children on her own. She picked up and moved to Mexico City.

Meanwhile, Haskin's father had remarried. She would never forget the afternoon he told her, "I have a new family now." It didn't make sense to her. Even though he'd remarried, she was still his daughter.

Haskin's anger and alienation grew. Her family had already moved around L.A. so many times when she was younger, living in Bel-Air, Nichols Canyon, Hollywood, Van Nuys, Woodland Hills. She now slept on couches and in guest rooms. She enrolled and reenrolled in high schools, never staying long enough to keep friendships. Her passions were photography and sports. But why bother? She would have to move in a few months. Why bother with anything? School felt like a prison. She was an outsider, alone, and without resources.

When Haskin began training to become a matadora, watching sporting events grew painful. The Olympics were the hardest to watch, with their feel-good stories about loving fathers pushing their kids. These athletes often had parents who supported their careers, paid for the best coaches, and spurred them to succeed. Why couldn't her dad do the same for her?

Yet her dad was in part responsible for her career. Her parents had introduced the fiesta to her family. Her dad had packed the car up and driven them across the border to watch a bullfight in Tijuana. Her parents had become members of Los Aficionados de Los Angeles, one of the oldest bullfighting clubs in the United States and where her dad purchased his first capote, the pink-and-yellow cape. He gave it to Haskin later, after they moved to Playa del Rey. They'd go to an alley near their house, and he'd teach her how to make passes with the cape.

As a young girl, Haskin looked up to her father and came to idolize the famous matadors they saw in Tijuana. As she got older, she started going to the same bullring with her friends to take pictures that she then developed herself. She built her own darkroom in her bedroom. And yet, later, even as she was earning a chance to perform among the best in Spain, her father rarely sent her letters. He did not know how far she had come or that she would be in Móstoles today. He had never asked. He had never seen her perform.

Haskin placed the montera over her hair and adjusted her suit of lights, then she and her sword handler left for the ring. They ducked into the back near the patio de caballos,

where the horses and dragging mules were milling around, she and the other novilleras twisting and turning in the anxious air, until finally the trumpets of the band sounded and the ceremonial procession began. Her elbow snug in the silks of her paseo cape, an honor once reserved for Spanish nobles, Haskin was amazed to think that she had arrived at this moment by hitchhiking through Mexico with a loaded Walther P38 9-millimeter pistol for safety, prowling the ranches for cows.

She had not planned to become a bullfighter. After she graduated from Santa Monica High School in 1971, she moved to Mexico City to live with her mother and take pictures with her new Mamiya/Sekor. She walked around the capital snapping images of mariachis in the markets and taco stands on the streets. On weekends when corridas were happening, she trekked to the Plaza México, the city’s bullring and the largest in the world. Once, to get better shots, she moved from the cheap seats down to the tendidos, or better seats, then gained entrance to the callejón, the passageway that lined the bullring, where she rubbed shoulders with sword handlers, ranchers, banderilleros, and hangers-on.

El Tío was her entry point. He was an elderly Mexico City photographer, and he and Haskin became friends. When the winter season finished in Mexico City, El Tío went on the road, hitting the pueblo circuit and following the bulls, novilleros, and matadors to the next festival. And so did she.

After several months, she didn’t want to take photos of bulls and bullfighters anymore. It wasn’t enough. She wanted to get closer.

“I want to torear,” she told El Tío.

“Are you sure?” he said, warning her that becoming a bullfighter was an impossible dream. Even the most talented needed funding, relationships, courage, and that special something extra. Plus all the luck in the world to avoid the horns.

Haskin understood the risks. Her mind was made up.

“Well, I know two novilleros that train up at the charreada in Mixcoac,” he said, referring to a neighborhood near the Plaza México. “If you want, I will go up there with you and introduce you. Maybe they will start teaching you.”

They went together, and the novilleros showed her how to hold the capote, the muleta, and the estoque and demonstrated the methods that have been passed from bullfighter to bullfighter over the centuries. She struggled to learn the technique for killing. Her forearms throbbed. But she continued, training with the two men and then others for months. At night, she watched and rewatched the grainy, soundless recordings she’d made on her little Super 8 camera of matadors making passes in the ring.

Her addiction set in quickly. Caping the cows and calves, she felt her adrenaline spiking, the power in her hands as the animals charged and circled her body. Her mind was clear, her focus intense. The opportunities to practice at the ranches were so few, and the sense of elation was so strong, that she spent most of the first year hitchhiking around the country to ranches, desperate for more passes.

One afternoon, she trekked to Tlaxcala, a ranch-heavy state outside of Mexico City, for a practice session with three-year-old cows. In attendance was Antonio José Galán, a matador from Spain known for his unique and bold killing technique. Galán was coming off his best year, having booked nearly 100 bullfights, and was considered among the best in the world. He was a guest of honor and watched Haskin perform. Her timing was in perfect sync with the cow. She was linking passes. Extending them. Galán was impressed. He pulled her aside.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

She was confused.

“Why don’t you go to Spain?”

Galán explained that the laws had changed. In the summer of 1974, Ángela Hernández, an aspiring matadora in Spain, had won a legal case that allowed all women to perform the same jobs as men. Women who dreamed of becoming matadoras were flocking to Spain, Galán said.

Her addiction set in quickly. Caping the cows and the calves, she felt her adrenaline spiking, the power in her hands as the animals charged.

Haskin had not yet heard the news.

“They are looking for toreras behind every door,” Galán told her. “Now that it’s legal, every promoter wants to put on a torera!”

She followed his advice, and now here she was, in Móstoles.

The first bull came through the chute. The peóns flashed their capes and directed the animal around the ring to study its behavior. Bulls are like puzzles, and to trick and tame them requires a mix of intelligence and instinct, bravery and skill. Was the bull favoring the right horn or the left? Was it charging straight, swerving, or bucking up?

In the callejón, Haskin and the other novilleras watched Carmela closely. Like many would-be matadoras, Carmela had learned to fight bulls on horseback, a practice dating back centuries. In the 18th century, as the position of bullfighter became more dangerous and moved from horse to foot, a number of notable matadoras emerged. And in the early 19th century, the artist Francisco Goya captured the first female star, Nicolasa Escamilla, known as La Pajuelera, in a well-known sketch.

Then Spain issued its bans against women bullfighters, first in 1909 and lasting until 1934, then again under Franco from 1940 to 1974. The prohibitions forced aspiring toreras to flee to places like Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and other former Spanish colonies that still promoted bullfights. The most talented was the sassy and confident Conchita Cintrón. Raised in Peru and a savant with horses, Cintrón had a successful career as a bullfighter, appearing alongside more than 750 bulls, often for solo performances or with legends like Antonio Ordóñez.

Cintrón was also a rebel. In 1949, she gave a despedida, her retirement performance, on horseback in Jaén, a part of southern Spain famous for its endless olive orchards. At the finale, she rode to the presidente of the ring’s box and asked him for an exception. For her last performance, could she dismount her horse and kill the bull on foot?

Permission was denied. She intended to do it anyway. She got down from her steed and flashed the muleta. Instead of plunging her sword into the bull, however, she dropped her estoque to the sand and boldly tapped her hand against the animal’s withers, simulating the act.

Bushels of red carnations flew down into the arena from delighted aficionados. Cintrón was taken away in handcuffs, arrested for violating the ban. Ardent fans pleaded for her release, and she was pardoned.

“You can’t keep a lady waiting forever,” Orson Welles, the director and bullfight aficionado, wrote of Cintrón.

Her example helped other women to enter the ring, even a few Americans. The most accomplished was Patricia McCormick from Texas, who appeared in more than 300 corridas during the 1950s. In one performance, she was so severely gored that a priest said last rites for her (she ultimately recovered). Her male rivals talked about how far she could have gone and how much she could have earned. If only she’d been born a male, they said. Her top rival was Bette Ford, a model and actor from New York who was believed to be the first American woman to perform in the famed Plaza México. Ford and the others were revolutionaries, breaking down barriers with their own guts and blood. They found a way to showcase their art and never let fear stop them. Fear was deadly. Bulls could smell fear. “If you fear something, walk into it,” Ford once said.

Back in Móstoles, Carmela could not bring the best out of her bull. Nor could Granada, the second novillera to perform that afternoon. The energy in the ring was dying, leaving Maria, the third in line, to revitalize the crowd.

She was brilliant. Maria had matured and was in total control for every act of the performance: her veronicas with the capote were smooth and long; her faena, the final act of the performance, with the muleta was clicking; she killed so well that the presidente of the ring awarded her two ears and a tail, the highest honors possible. As Maria made her victory lap around the little plaza, Haskin watched the roses fall onto her rival. She knew that in only a few moments, once the flowers were cleaned up, she would need to achieve the performance of her career to top Maria.

The sun was out and blinding the fans on the sunny side of the plaza. She looked into the crowd and scanned the faces. Every seat in the portable ring was filled by now. So many faces! The lady in the polka-dot dress, the old man in his beret, the stout man with the mustache, her mom, those three little kids from her flat. She saw the cameras of the photographers in the callejón, and it was incredible to think that only a few years ago, she had been one of them.

The toril gate was open, and she watched her bull rush out of the chute and storm toward the barrera, kicking up dust, looking this way, pausing, looking that way, ears alert, now head down and charging.

She grabbed her capote and ran toward the bull. She wanted to be the first to receive it and make the first passes herself, guiding its movements, feeling its power. As she drew close, she could hear its breath and the thud of its hooves. She could see the thick black hair and the rack of horns moving toward her.

Be still, she told herself. Stay in position. She tossed out the cape as her father had taught her and as she had later done hundreds if not thousands of times in the green grass of Mexico's parks, trying to get the timing down like in the photos she kept of the classicist Antonio Ordóñez and artsy Rafael de Paula. She kept her feet planted firmly in the dirt, curling the canvas tight in her fingers, directing the bull into the sway of the cloth, then wrapping it across her waist like a bath towel. Then she did it again. Her timing was perfect. She was radiating a shock of electricity as the shouts came thundering down. *Olé!*

Her bull was in good condition: charging in a straight line, not hooking in, and not lifting its head. Haskin had to be careful. Any misstep could ruin the lidia. The tempo Haskin was creating could fade.

She returned to the callejón. Her sword handler passed her a goblet filled with water. She sipped and spit it out (bullfighters don't like to keep water in their stomachs, in case surgeons need to operate). She watched as her banderilleros placed the barbed sticks well, and she steeled herself for the all-important faena. She grabbed her sword. The bull was in the center of the ring, waiting for her. The crowd hushed. She entered the ring again and could hear the sand crunching under her slippers.

Nearly 50 years later, Haskin remembers her faena that afternoon. She started with pases por alto, followed by a series of derechazos, close passes with the right hand. The pace and tempo were smooth, the bull turning and changing as if on rails. The red flannel of her muleta never touched its horns, never touched its muzzle. Again, her tempo stayed perfect.

Next came the naturales, the harder and more daring cape passes made with the left hand. She was not thinking, just linking passes. Pases de pecho. Remates. The full repertoire. The crowd was with her, and she could feel its excitement with her in every pass.

She walked with determination to the barrera for the killing sword. She then returned for a series of trincherazos and pases de la firma and prepared for the kill.

Keep the hooves aligned, the shoulders squared, the shoulder blades opened up. Do not wait, she told herself.

She flopped the cloth over, placing it low as a lure. Then came the motion. A low dart of the cloth, a high jump over the right horn. She made her move decisively. There was no pain, no crash of the pommel against her palm, no sword nicking bone and jolting against her. The estoque entered the withers cleanly. The bull dropped immediately.

She looked up. The crowd was a blur of white handkerchiefs, all pumping and rooting for her. Two ears were awarded. Then a tail. She passed her mom, a handful of friends, and the Portuguese American kids from her apartment back in Madrid. She handed the tail of her bull to one of them, the little boy, and the applause only continued, the white handkerchiefs waving. Then the chanting started.

Then came the motion. A low dart of the cloth, a high jump over the right horn. She made her move decisively.

"Pata! Pata! Pata!"

The aficionados were demanding that the presidente give her another trophy: the hoof of the bull, a now-dated tradition, but one that would give her a boost over Maria.

The presidente acquiesced. The hoof was granted.

Now the fans were trampling their way down from the stands and running toward her in the ring. They were on her. She felt fingers around her thighs and hands on her back. She was picked up, hoisted on shoulders, and paraded around the ring like a saint. From her perch in the air, she looked back at the dead bull. It had been so long since bullfighters had been awarded hooves that the ring workers were not prepared. The puntillero needed a bigger knife.

The afternoon in Móstoles is among Haskin's finest memories, a breaking point in her career, and yet Haskin does not look back on it often. She wanted to use her momentum from that performance to go further and be the first woman in modern times to take the alternativa in Spain. She had plans to stay there, find a place to live in Madrid, and keep performing. But as hard as she trained, she struggled to gain traction.

It was her own fault, she admits. After her triumph in Móstoles, she was approached by a well-connected manager who offered to secure her bookings in bigger plazas and bulls from the most notable ranches. She turned him down. She couldn't trust him, she felt, and about two years later, she went back to Mexico to hustle up performances herself.

Impossible, she found, to train every day and hustle business without any capital or connections. She was only 26, with plenty of drive and little experience. The poorer offers came her way, and she soon found herself in Guatemala performing with a lot of Brahma bulls, one of which gored and nearly killed one of her friends. And from there, her streak of bad luck continued. In 1991, her manager—who truly believed in her—suddenly passed away after helping her for two years.

She was angry. She plunged into a state of sadness. She stopped training and fell out of shape. She wondered whether all those hitchhikes to Apizaco and Aguascalientes and other ranches throughout Mexico, and that broken wrist, or the knee that popped out, and the slashing of her traje de luces, and even triumphs like the afternoon in Móstoles had been a fool's errand. In one story written about her, published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Lyn Sherwood, an American bullfight critic, was quoted as saying, "Honey Haskin has been around for a bunch of years and has gone absolutely nowhere.... She has been involved for 15 years and has gained no attention from anybody."

Haskin lives in the San Fernando Valley neighborhood of Sherman Oaks now and seems trapped there by the promise of her past. She is 69 and for a while worked on a documentary about female bullfighters like Cristina Sánchez, the first matadora to take the alternativa in modern Europe, in 1996, nearly 20 years after Haskin appeared in Móstoles. She taught herself to edit film but couldn't find the funding to finish it. There was also a second unfinished documentary. She has volunteered for various causes, including at animal shelters. She is not in the physical condition to practice with cows, as many veterans of the ring do as a hobby. She remains guarded. When we talk, the conversations go long and deep on the science of bullfighting, the updates her old taurine friends are posting on Facebook, and those bad decisions she thinks she made when she was younger. It is not enough that her bravery and skill and determination led her to receive a hoof in Móstoles, that she dressed in the suit of lights and entered the bullring more than 50 times, and that she achieved a level of excellence in this niche that so few women could occupy during the past century. She needed more. She was so close.

"I could have gone farther," she says. ■

Geoffrey Gray is an award-winning journalist and has covered the bullfighting world for the New York Times *and* Sports Illustrated. *He cowrote* Gored, *a documentary about the most injured matador in history, which debuted at the Tribeca Film Festival and is available on most major streaming services. He wrote about the hunt for the Lost Dutchman Mine for* Alta Journal *22.*

By JULIAN SMITH • *Illustrations by* JOHN MATTOS

'AGUA, AGUA'

In 1905, prospector Pablo Valencia survived a week without water as he walked—and stumbled, and crawled—more than 100 miles in the Sonoran Desert. Seventy-five years later, high school teacher Bill Broyles retraced his route and lived to talk about it.

The moment Bill Broyles dug up the plastic water container he had buried under the palo verde tree, he realized he was in serious trouble.

It was midmorning in early August 1980, and daytime temperatures on the Arizona-Mexico border were well over 100 degrees. There was little or no shade in this part of the Sonoran Desert, about 40 miles east of Yuma.

After a day and night of hiking, he was down to a single cupful of water. The five-gallon plastic jug he'd buried a few weeks before—the one he was counting on to keep him alive in the furnace of late summer—was now empty. Puncture marks showed what had happened.

"A coyote had got to it," Broyles says. "He was probably the happiest coyote in Sonora County."

Alone, on foot, and almost out of water in one of the hottest deserts in North America, Broyles knew his life was suddenly at risk.

And because of the story that had brought him here—the almost unimaginable ordeal of a Mexican prospector in this very place, 75 years earlier—Broyles also knew just how bad it could get.

"I realized, I've become the person I'm looking for," he says. "I've become Pablo Valencia."

In August 1905, the geologist and anthropologist William McGee was working at a field camp at Tinajas Altas, a series of water-carved pools in the granite mountains on the border between the Arizona Territory and Mexico. With help from his camp manager, a local from the Tohono O'odham tribe named Jose, McGee spent his days gathering data on the weather, studying the area flora and fauna, and sleeping under the stars.

Tinajas Altas was the only dependable source of water for a 100-mile stretch of El Camino del Diablo, a notoriously difficult route that ran along the American side of the border. Over the centuries, Indigenous people, Jesuit missionaries, American pioneers, and gold seekers had all traveled the desert track, part of a longer trail between northern Mexico and southern California. Hundreds of graves marked with crosses of heaped pebbles told the fate of those who had died along the way.

Even reaching Tinajas Altas wasn't a guarantee of salvation. Some travelers arrived to find the lower pools dry and no longer had the strength to reach the upper basins, where water might be available. Bodies were found with their fingers worn to the bone from trying to climb the rough granite.

On August 14, two men rode into McGee's camp. Jesus Rios, 65, was a former vaquero. Pablo Valencia, 40, had served as a sailor in the Pacific before turning to mining and prospecting in the Southwest deserts. McGee was impressed by how strong Valencia looked.

> Valencia was tough and had experience staying alive in the desert. Still, he knew he had only a certain amount of time left before his water ran out.

The pair's goal was a recently rediscovered gold mine on a rocky ledge about a day and a half's ride east, on the Mexican side of the border. They carried enough food for a week, but only six gallons of water. McGee knew that wasn't nearly sufficient for two men traveling for three days in the heat of summer, even on horseback. Despite his warning, the six gallons were all the water they took when they left at 3:45 a.m.

Rios returned the next night with both horses. They had traveled about 35 miles, he said, before Valencia sent him back to get more water and continued on foot carrying two gallons. They had agreed to meet a day or so later, on the far side of a small mountain range. McGee thought this vague plan was "inane if not insane," a second serious mistake in a place that left no room for error.

Rios refilled his canteens with five more gallons and set off again before dawn. He was back a little over 24 hours later, almost as exhausted as his horse. He hadn't been able to find any sign of Valencia at the rendezvous point, and he didn't have enough water to search or wait around. Hoping his partner had backtracked, Rios had decided to do the same. On August 17, McGee sent Jose, an experienced tracker, on horseback to find Valencia. He returned to camp speechless from fatigue the next day, alone.

It was now August 18. Valencia had been alone for three days with only about one day's worth of water. For the next few days, McGee kept an eye out for any sign of the lost prospector. But he was sure there was no way Valencia was still alive.

Broyles was working as a high school English teacher and track coach in Tucson when he first came across McGee's account of his experience with Valencia, *Desert Thirst As Disease*. The 1906 monograph had become a classic in the literature on dehydration and desert survival, read by doctors and search and rescue teams alike. Broyles had already spent years hiking, camping, and driving throughout the Sonoran Desert, captivated by its austere, unforgiving beauty, but he knew it could be as deadly as it was enchanting. In July 1980, a month before he set out on Valencia's trail, half of a group of 26 Salvadorans had died in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, within earshot of a highway, after being abandoned by a smuggler.

Broyles wanted to understand how something like that could happen and what separated those who lived from those who died. He wondered how accurate the rough description of Valencia's route really was. Deep down, Broyles admitted, he also wanted to test himself. He was running marathons at the time and had just finished an emergency medical technician class.

"I thought, I'm pretty tough. I can do that," Broyles says. He planned ahead and buried water caches at strategic points of the journey, which he described in a 1982 article. "Intending to parallel [Valencia's] route, I had no design to parallel his plight," he wrote. "But the desert doesn't always honor human plans."

Like Valencia, Broyles left Tinajas Altas early on an August morning. Mesquite and creosote bushes spotted the dun-colored landscape. Steep, isolated mountain ranges rose in all directions like dark islands.

By 11 a.m., his thermometer read 101 degrees in the shade, and he had drained the first of his three canteens. "Emptying a canteen, even when another is at hand, is shocking," he wrote, "like switching to the reserve gas tank on a remote stretch of highway."

He crossed into Mexico—border security was looser then—and sat down to rest around noon. Even though he didn't feel particularly tired, he dozed off briefly, a sign that his body was already running low on water and salt.

As he continued, Broyles thought about how the Sonoran Desert was so unlike the overwhelming scenery of places like Yellowstone or Yosemite. The desert was a void, a place that demanded instead of offered. "It mirrors the self, reveals your own strengths and weaknesses," he wrote. "Here you can expect nothing—and will get nothing—except yourself."

Later in the afternoon, he took refuge in the scant shade under an acacia. He unearthed his first cache of water, refilled his canteens, and hiked into the evening. After a flamboyant sunset, the stars were bright enough to light his way through hedgehog cactus and the tall, thorny wands of ocotillos. The sand radiated the day's heat until well after dark. At midnight, it was still 94 degrees.

A pair of croaking ravens woke him at sunrise. It was midmorning by the time he reached the tree where he had buried his second cache and eagerly started digging.

After Rios had left to get more water, Valencia managed to find the rocky ledge, where he staked a claim and gathered ore samples. But any excitement must have evaporated quickly when Rios didn't show up at the rendezvous.

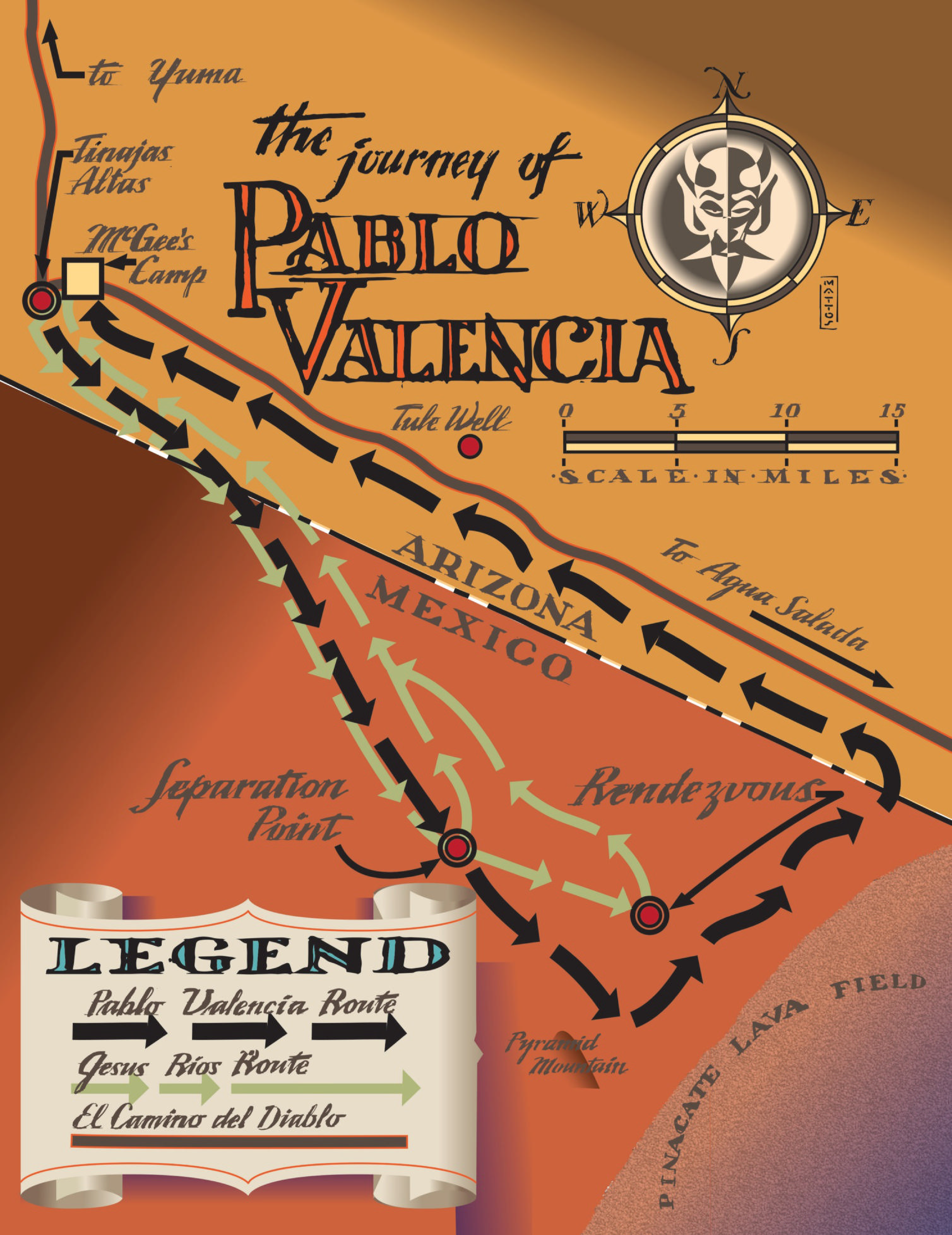
Valencia was tough and had experience staying alive in the desert. Still, he knew he had only a certain amount of time left before his water ran out. Alone in a sea of sand, it was as if he were inside an hourglass that had just been flipped.

Since there was nothing but 20 miles of raw lava fields to the east, turning around was the clear choice. But if he could reach El Camino del Diablo, about 10 miles north, he could travel faster, and the odds were higher that he might meet someone who could help.

As Valencia walked for the next two days, his body passed through the early stages of dehydration. His thirst became worse by the hour, his head throbbed, and his steps grew unsteady. The weather was cloudier than usual for that time of year, but the heat was still overwhelming, sucking moisture from his body with his every breath.

When his canteen was empty, he started shoving anything that might have the tiniest bit of water into his mouth: the thick, spiny leaves of a mezcal plant; bitter wild gourds called calabacitas; even a few spiders and a scorpion he managed to catch.

He discarded everything that might weigh him down: money, knife, tobacco, food, ore samples, everything except his empty canteen. He needed that to collect his urine, gargling a mouthful from time to time to relieve his parched throat. Eventually, his body stopped sweating, its main way of staying cool. The blood in his arteries started to thicken, and his pulse sped up as his heart struggled to keep his circulation going.


the journey of
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SCALE IN MILES
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MEXICO
To Agua Salada
Separation Point
Rendezvous
Pyramid Mountain
PINACATE LAVA FIELD
LEGEND
Pablo Valencia Route
Gesus Ríos Route
El Camino del Diablo

MATTOS

As the cells of his brain started to shrink, Valencia's thoughts went haywire. He became convinced that Rios had deliberately abandoned him so he could have the gold mine for himself. Homicidal rage helped spur him forward.

Somehow, Valencia managed to keep his head enough to continue walking north, in the right direction. He stumbled on the mule-wagon tracks that marked El Camino del Diablo on August 19, four days after leaving McGee's camp. It was about 40 miles back to Tinajas Altas.

> Broyles abandoned most of his gear, including his camera and wallet, and pushed himself to walk as fast as he could. Like Valencia, he felt his mind start to slip.

At least he was moving faster now. And he knew that about halfway back to Tinajas Altas there was a 30-foot-deep pit—Tule Well, located about a mile off the road—that might have some water. Buzzards were already circling overhead as he started west. Mountains and bushes swam before his eyes. Sometimes he found himself crawling.

Time stretched and twisted. At some point the next day, he came upon a signpost that warned, "GO BACK AND FILL YOUR CANTEEN." He had passed the side trail to Tule Well.

Through a haze of pain and exhaustion, Valencia tried his best to make a logical choice. He could turn around and backtrack, but he might find that the well was dry, or he could end up trapped in the hole. Although the thought of crawling into cool mud at the bottom to die was tempting, Valencia wasn't ready to give up yet. He hung his hat on the guidepost as a signal should anyone come looking for him and staggered on through another night, imagining how wonderful it would be to stick a knife between Rios's ribs.

Throughout the following day, he hallucinated the sounds of wheels and hoofs and napped in the middle of the road. He woke to the blank stares of buzzards sitting barely out of arm's reach. Somewhere he lost all his clothes.

Before dawn on August 22, Valencia reached a guidepost that was just six miles from Tinajas Altas. But he couldn't go any farther. He lay in the shade of a shrub, made the sign of the cross, and felt his spirit leave his shriveled body.

McGee thought he was dreaming about a bull bellowing as it led a line of cattle across a range. Then he realized that he was awake and the noise coming from the darkness was real. He and Jose grabbed two canteens and a medicine case and ran down the road. It was August 23, eight days after Valencia and Rios had first left camp.

In the sand under an ironwood tree, they found what looked like a skeleton sheathed in purplish-gray rawhide. Valencia's body was covered in bloodless gashes from crawling over rocks and cacti. His face was something they would never forget:

> *His lips had disappeared as if amputated, leaving low edges of blackened tissue; his teeth and gums projected like those of a skinned animal, but the flesh was black and dry as a hank of jerky; his nose was withered and shrunken to half its length; the nostril-lining showing black; his eyes were set in a winkless stare.*

Valencia barely had a pulse and was almost completely deaf and blind. The only sound he could make was the unearthly moaning that had woken them.

"In a cracked voice, breaking involuntarily from bass to falsetto, he began to beg pathetically for 'agua, agua,'" McGee wrote. When they doused him with water, at first his skin was too desiccated to absorb any; then it started to soak it up "as greedily as a dry sponge." It was an hour before he could actually swallow anything. In the meantime, his rescuers dribbled diluted whiskey down his throat and gave him tablets containing digitalis, nitroglycerin, and belladonna to stimulate his heart. As his circulation slowly returned, the wounds that covered his body started to ooze blood. After about three hours, they were able to help him back to camp.

Valencia slowly returned to life over the next few days. Bit by bit, he was able to recognize objects—shrubs, rocks, his own hands and feet—and keep down meals of wild birds, rice, and bacon. Eventually, he started trying to put into words what he had been through. In the six and a half days since he had run out of water, he had walked or crawled somewhere between 100 and 150 miles. It was a mystery even to him how he had dragged himself those last few miles.

Once he was back on his feet, Valencia traveled by wagon to Yuma, where he spent an entire day deliberately and methodically devouring watermelons. Within a week, the prospector had recovered the 20 or so pounds he had lost and seemed to be doing well, McGee wrote, "though his stiff and bristly hair, which had hardly a streak of gray a fortnight before, had lost half its mass and turned iron-gray." What happened to Valencia after that, including whether he ever returned to the mine or confronted his former partner, is unknown.

Broyles gave up digging and sat in the shade, sipping slowly from his final cup of water. The nearest place he might find help was a ranch six miles east, close to where Valencia and Rios were supposed to meet. He didn't want to miss it in the dark—or be shot for trespassing—so he left in midafternoon instead of waiting for nightfall. It was 106 degrees, and a rainbow hung tantalizingly in the northeast.

What would have been an easy hike in cooler weather was harder than any marathon Broyles had ever run. Again and again, he had to rest in whatever scant shade he could find. His breath came in gasps, his heart pounded, and his legs felt like they were made of lead. When he started stumbling, Broyles realized he had to make a break for it.

He abandoned most of his gear, including his camera and wallet, and pushed himself to walk as fast as he could. Like Valencia, he felt his mind start to slip. Trees and rock formations began to look like cars, houses, convenience stores. Was that really a cow trail he was following? Would the next people he saw kill him for the $5 in his pocket? But wait—hadn't he left his money behind?

Broyles had heard enough desert survival stories to know that cutting open a cactus was a waste of time and energy, but the temptation was just too great. The inside was gritty and drier than his mouth.

Just before sunset, he saw a windmill that marked the ranch. There he found two vaqueros, who gave him water and coffee, then grapes and tuna salad. "From what they later said, I looked very wilted," Broyles recalled in his published account. Today he can barely find words to express his gratitude. "If they hadn't been there, I probably wouldn't be here today."

Broyles returned a couple of weeks later and finished retracing Valencia's route. The experience left him astonished at what the prospector had done—and gave him even more empathy than he already had for the undocumented immigrants who brave the desert to enter the United States every year. "As amazing as Pablo Valencia's feat was, I'm appalled, shaken really, by the thousands of real-life stories about ordinary people," he says.

The dangers are rising: Between September 2021 and September 2022, U.S. Customs and Border Protection rescued over 22,000 migrants trying to cross the Mexican border. At least 853 died—more than a quarter of them in Arizona—making 2022 the deadliest year for border crossers on record. As much as Valencia suffered, Broyles says, his story still had a better ending than theirs. ■

Julian Smith's latest book, Aloha Rodeo: Three Hawaiian Cowboys, the World's Greatest Rodeo, and a Hidden History of the American West, *won the 2020 Oregon Book Award. He most recently wrote about a daring rescue of firefighters in California's Trinity Alps for* Alta Journal *21.*

By Denise Hamilton • *Illustrations by* Zoe Matthiessen

P-22'S LIFE IN L.A.

Hazards stalked him every day. But somehow, Griffith Park's big puma survived in the wild for more than a decade. His death devastated the city he called home.

I: THE MAN

It's a real sanctuary, the first I've discovered since fleeing my birth den and journeying miles and miles through the most alien, booby-trapped hellscape you can imagine.

Sure, there's danger here, too. I'm hemmed in on all sides of this tiny wilderness by fast-moving rivers of metal. And my new dominion's overrun with that loud, smelly species I avoid at all costs.

But the humans and cars mostly melt away at night, and there are ravines to hide in. And deer. So many deer.

I leap onto their backs from a stealth position low in the bushes, their flesh yielding under my claws, their necks snapping like dry branches. How I feast!

Before dawn, I drag their carcasses off the trails and cache them under soil and leaves, returning for three nights while the meat remains fresh.

By day, I lie up in remote canyons.

When the sun falls, I rise to feed or hunt again, to scent mark and explore the contours of my strange new world, sending out chirps and cries for others of my kind that get no replies.

Then comes the night that changes my world and yours.

It's winter. Still newly arrived, I'm prowling a hillside trail, my excellent night vision and hearing alert for prey.

Snap, and something grabs my paw. I yank hard, but I'm trapped.

Humans approach.

A loud pop. A sting. My head droops. My limbs buckle. I hit the ground and spin into the void.

Do big cats dream?

Do we twitch with nightmares of alpha predators that even we cannot vanquish?

Six times in my life, I'll face the same nightmare and one man in particular: a powerful magician armed with a bewildering weapon against which teeth, claws, and stealth are useless.

In my black swamp of terror, paralysis, and wrongness, I am poked and prodded. Something is placed around my neck. My eyes are closed, but I see my adversary. His eyes flare with the same intensity that I turn on the deer I stalk.

But there is no death in his eyes.

Six times, this man will resurrect me, and I'll lift my groggy head to find *them* standing around me. My only instinct that of flight, I'll stagger to my paws and plod unsteadily away into the brush.

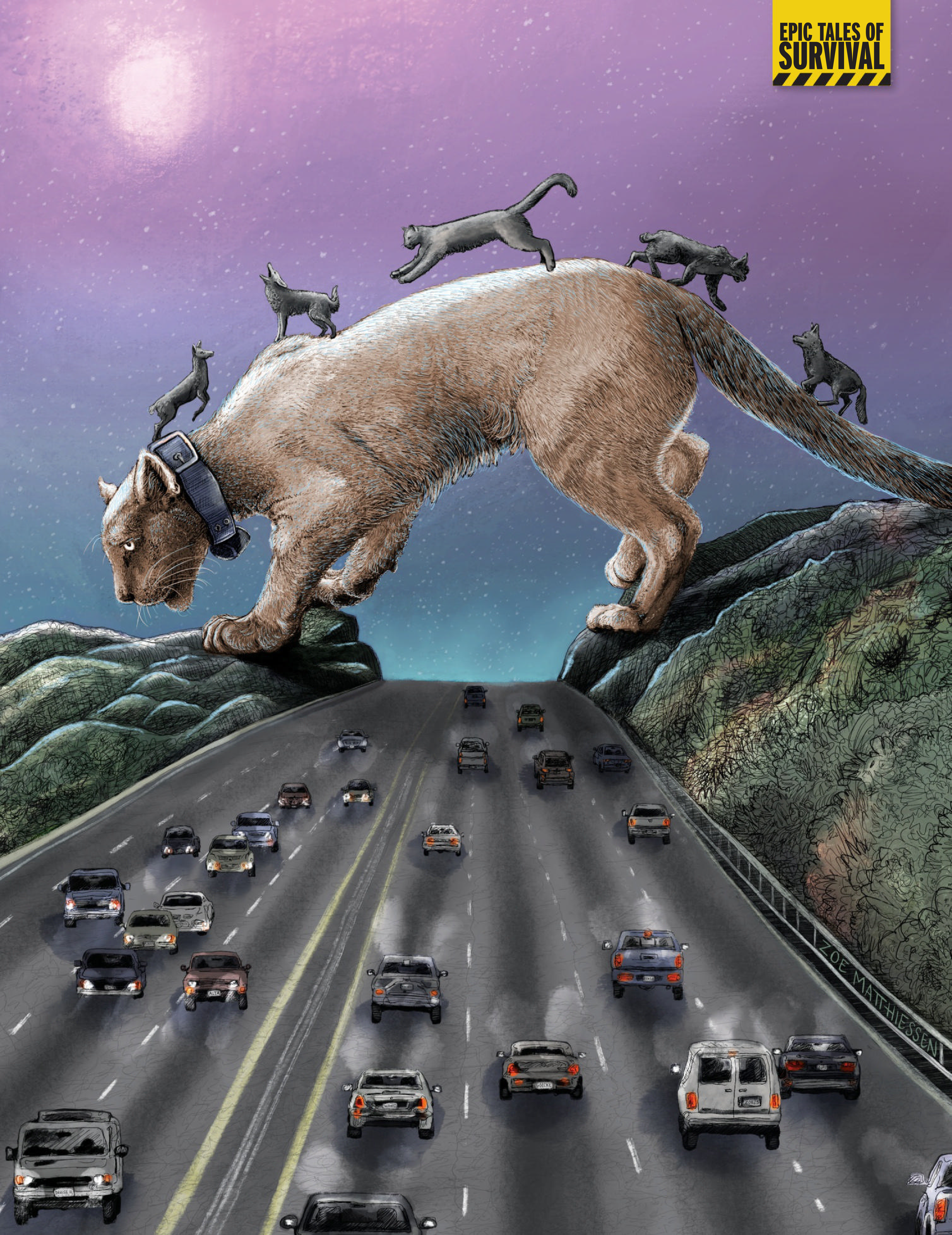
Then comes our seventh and last encounter.

This one will have a different ending.

II: WAKE

A remote den in the western Santa Monica Mountains. It's lined with moss or other vegetation—a pile of rocks, a thicket, a hillside crevice. It's 2010, probably spring or summer, and a mountain lion has just given birth to a litter of cubs. Their father is P-1, the first puma collared in Southern California. He's long gone, since mountain lions are solitary and meet only to mate.

P-1 has been closely monitored and studied by wildlife biologists, providing a trove of knowledge about the lives of these reclusive beasts. In scientist circles, P-1 is famous, the first in his line of collared cats. But take another look at those blind, mewling, one-pound newborns in that long-ago den. One of them will survive incredible odds, dodge danger every day of his life, embark on a perilous quest, discover a new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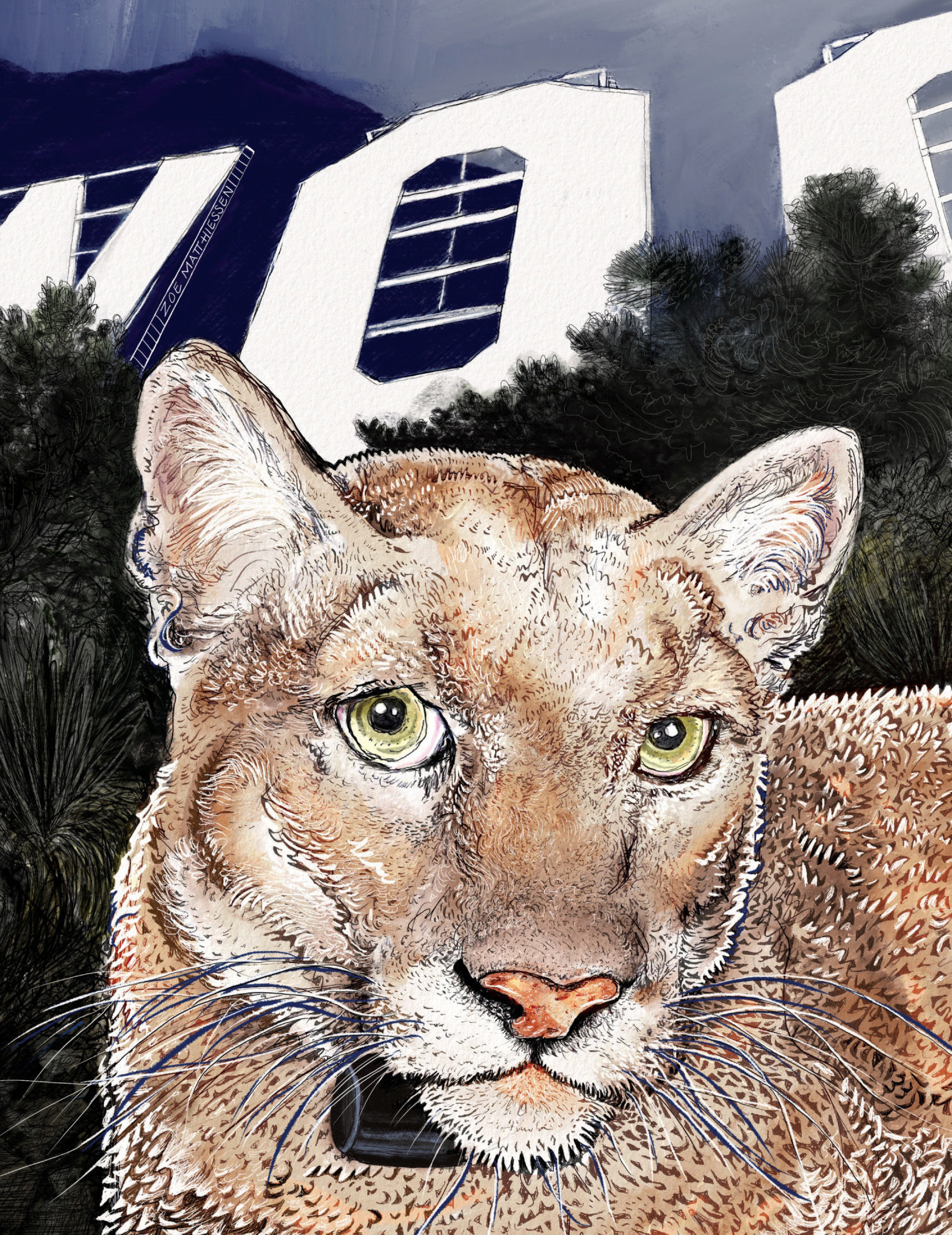
ZOË MATTHIESSEN

kingdom in an urban wilderness in the middle of Los Angeles called Griffith Park, and far eclipse his father in fame when his mythical story captures the hearts and imaginations of millions. He will become an icon and symbol of wildlife conservation. He will become P-22.

Even in the womb, P-22's survival was precarious.

Cars are the top killer of Southern California's pumas—they claimed the lives of five big cats in 2022 alone, including a female pregnant with four cubs who was killed crossing Las Virgenes Road near Calabasas. Necropsies showed rodenticides in the blood of mother and fetuses, potentially fatal poisons that travel up the food chain and cross the placenta.

P-22's mother isn't run over, killed by rodenticide, or slain by another lion—a third danger. She lives to nurture her cubs into adolescence. Still, they're vulnerable to predators whenever she leaves to hunt. That's why nature endows P-22, and all puma newborns, with camouflage: black stripes and spots that fade to beige at six months.

At first, his mother brings home meat. By the six-month mark, when the cubs are weaned, she has begun teaching P-22 and his siblings to hunt. They start with small prey like skunks and rabbits, then graduate to deer. Fifteen months pass. P-22 is now an adolescent.

It's time to establish his own territory or die, because older males already claim his birthplace. The signs abound: Claw marks on tree trunks. Scent marking. The "scuffs" in which males claw up dirt mixed with urine and feces to claim their range.

But where can P-22 go?

One male puma can roam 150 square miles, and the Santa Monica Mountains span only 300 square miles. Plus: they're encircled by development, freeways, and ocean. Most young males here don't live past two; they're killed by older lions or by cars if they flee across highways. In urban areas, they risk being shot, like the young male puma who ventured into downtown Santa Monica in 2012 only to be killed by police.

Territory is a particularly acute problem for P-22, whose father, P-1, was a big, aggressive dude, even by cougar standards. He was a "vicious individual" who killed other males, his offspring, and even his mates, according to Miguel Ordeñana, the wildlife biologist who will discover P-22.

In 2011, P-22 leaves his home. He travels east until he reaches the hills overlooking the 405 freeway, which smells evil and poisonous, its cars whooshing past at terrifying speeds. Somehow, he crosses—a feat that stumps biologists, whose wildlife-monitoring cameras at street bridges and tunnels capture not one image of the milestone.

P-22 continues east, probably hugging dense green space and unused land, keeping to less well-lit neighborhoods, traversing backyards, hillsides, drainage ditches, and the lethal speedway of Mulholland Drive. He slips unnoticed through Bel-Air, Beverly Glen, the Hollywood Hills. In early 2012, he meets another seemingly insurmountable obstacle: the 101 freeway. Eight lanes of traffic, but nary a wildlife camera records his passage into Griffith Park.

A ghost cat.

A ghost cat whose days of obscurity are ending.

III: THE SURVIVOR

Time stamp: February 12, 2012, 9:15 p.m.

I feel safe moving along the animal trails amid the dense brush and trees around the lake they call the Hollywood Reservoir. But that's an illusion, because suddenly my paw is seized in a trap. Fear floods me. It doesn't hurt, but I can't get away. Across the mountains, a device owned by the Man rings.

A small group gathers under the stars to examine me with wonder and awe: the first live mountain lion ever found in Griffith Park. As I stare nervously back, the Man knocks me out with a dart gun.

With lamps strapped to their heads and gloves on their hands, they poke a needle into my flesh and draw blood. They weigh and measure, examine my long, curving teeth, tag my ear, stick a thermometer up my butt. In later encounters, I'll be shot full of vitamins, have my GPS batteries swapped out, and be healed of sickness. But for now, I'm a healthy "subadult" two-year-old male who weighs 121 pounds and stretches six and a half feet from muzzle to tail tip.

A one-pound radio collar made of polyurethane, plastic, and metal is placed around my neck. Eight times a day, my location will be beamed to orbiting satellites, which will relay my coordinates back to the Man.

They also name me. I'm P-22, the 22nd puma collared in the Santa Monica Mountains, whose eastern boundary is Griffith Park, my park.

As dawn breaks, an antidote wakes me, and the humans step back. I stand, take a few wobbly steps, and vanish into the chaparral. But I don't leave the safest place I've ever found.

I settle in.

Los Feliz, Hollywood Hills, Lake Hollywood, Forest Lawn, the hills above Universal Studios and Warner Bros., the golf courses and horse trails, the mortuaries and the L.A. Zoo: Nightly, I patrol my dominion in my slouchy model stroll, searching for ladycats, hunting, and scrupulously avoiding the loud, smelly species. In our rare encounters, I am timid, not aggressive. I hunt deer, which is most of my diet, with a sprinkling of coyotes and raccoons. No pet dogs—except one, unleashed, found wandering in my park. Tastes like coyote.

That's how my days go until I develop mange, a parasitic skin disease that can kill. Weakened, I lose weight, and my face becomes grotesquely disfigured, my once-fluffy tail thin as a rope. It may have been a rodenticide-tainted animal I ate. The Man captures me again, treats me with vitamin K and topical medicine. They say two of my puma compatriots died despite treatment, but I recover.

There's a house near the park whose cellar I like to slip into to snooze the day away. One day, workmen arrive, see me, and run out screaming. Believe me, I'm not thrilled either. More humans come. They pummel me with tennis balls and poke me with sticks to get me out. Nope. Not moving. A crowd gathers on the street, but the Man is not among them. I hunker down. It's a standoff. Late at night, when they finally leave, I flee back to my park.

The zoo intrigues me greatly. So many animals. Such interesting smells. With my long hind legs and powerful haunches, I can easily clear the eight-foot-tall enclosure. One night, koala is on the menu. For a similar transgression, one of my brethren—P-56—pays the price and is shot. For some reason, the zoo spares me.

My most famous nocturnal sojourn is a routine but apparently memorable one: a photographer has hidden a camera that captures me predawn, staring ahead as I pass a famous sign that also lives in the park.

Afterward, my fame skyrockets, as the loud, smelly species says. I inspire an annual park festival, fundraisers, bills to outlaw rodenticides, a future wildlife crossing, social media accounts.

But the big cat stays wild, and life for me is fending off one threat after another.

I'm constantly dodging cars and people. I've never found a mate. My territory is less than one-twentieth that of a typical male cougar. Each raccoon or other small meal is a rodenticide gamble that could kill me.

The passage of years erodes my strength. Sometimes my insides don't feel right. Taking out a mule deer now takes it out of *me*.

One spring night, I leave my park and range farther than ever before, to the domain of Silver Lake, where small wild prey abounds. When a car approaches, I crouch in my trademark cougar defensive position until it passes. Humans see me, too, but we ignore each other as always.

By fall, I haven't given up on deer, but each kill is harder. One night, I spot a small dog walking on a leash near Lake Hollywood. Instinct and hunger take over, and I snatch it. But I need to eat 30 pounds of meat a day, and hunger gnaws at me. I lose weight, grow weaker. I try to grab another Chihuahua in Silver Lake, but its owner pummels me, and I let go.

I've always avoided people and leashed pets, stuck close to my wild park. But my behavior is changing, and I'm risking more encounters with humans. Do I pose a danger to them as well as to myself?

In the weeks before the winter holidays celebrated by humans, I'm crossing Los Feliz Boulevard early one night when I hear a screech, then a crash that knocks me down.

Pain. Terror. Confusion.

Everything hurts.

I rise and stagger into a courtyard. Humans follow me, and I flee again.

Must find shelter.

My head throbs, clouding my thoughts. Instinct leads me to a familiar backyard. On this overgrown quarter-acre hillside where I feel safe, I'll rest and recover. But maybe I've returned here to die.

IV: SLUMBER

At 10:15 a.m. on December 12 of 2022, Jeff Sikich, a wildlife biologist with the National Park Service at Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, who for years has managed all fieldwork on big cats,

GRIFFITH PARK
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R.I.P
P-22

GETTY IMAGES

After P-22 was put down, memorials like this one outside Griffith Park—a place the beloved cougar long called home—spoke to a city's collective mourning.

pulls up to a Los Feliz home.

Sikich's colleague knocks on homeowner Sarah Picchi's door and explains there's a sick mountain lion in her backyard. Picchi, who's following the saga like so many Angelenos, knows it's P-22. The cougar has visited her home before.

Aided by his telemetry receiver, Sikich hikes up the muddy hillside and heads right for P-22. Two other biologists fan out in case the sick cat runs.

P-22 doesn't flee. He lies there and waits for Sikich, the Man who for a decade has been his nemesis, advocate, and caretaker. As Sikich draws close, the big cat rises, but only to hide behind a tree, which leaves his haunch exposed.

The tranquilizer dart sounds like an air gun.

Soon the litter bearers appear, carrying an unconscious P-22 in a green tarp, his fur stuck with twigs and wet leaves.

The somber procession files down the hillside, and Picchi sees the puma's chest rising and falling. His eyes are closed. As Sikich performs a health check, Picchi notes the respect and compassion he displays toward the cat. Like they've known each other a lifetime. Which they have.

P-22 is placed inside a large metal box with air holes and taken to the L.A. Zoo he once explored, then the San Diego Zoo Safari Park, where he is examined by veterinarians who specialize in large cats. A metropolis of 10 million waits.

When test results arrive, they're dire. P-22 has a skull fracture and severe internal injuries. He has a torn diaphragm and herniated organs protruding into his chest cavity, probably from the car crash. Kidney failure, advanced liver disease, heart disease, and a widespread parasitic skin infection. He's lost a quarter of his body weight.

Five days after his capture, doctors make the excruciating decision to euthanize P-22, the puma who changed lives and civic attitudes about conservation. A $100 million wildlife crossing over the 101 in Agoura Hills wouldn't be under construction without him.

Beth Pratt, California regional director of the National Wildlife Federation and a longtime advocate for P-22, sits near him. She tells him he is a very good boy.

Later, a new sound will rise from the assembled wildlife experts, one P-22 has never heard before from the loud, smelly species.

It is the sound of crying.

V: THE GHOST

My body is brought to L.A. County's Natural History Museum, accompanied by the one who first discovered me on a wildlife camera, Miguel Ordeñana.

We are met by descendants of many tribes of Indigenous people, on whose land my ancestors once roamed and were revered.

The tribal leaders, who recite a blessing for me, want to see me buried in my park, where I once reigned as king. Where I belong.

Will the spirit of L.A.'s Ghost Cat haunt Griffith Park?

It already does. ■

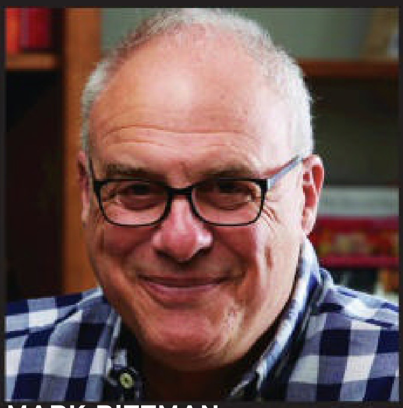
Denise Hamilton wrote about feral hogs for Alta Journal *19.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Yes, this story does take some liberties in having P-22 narrate his own story. Everything stated is, however, based on extensive research, reporting, and interviews with humans who played important roles in P-22's life. Particular thanks to:

- Jeff Sikich, a wildlife biologist with the National Park Service at Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, who captured P-22 seven times between 2012 and 2022 and knew the big cat better than anyone.
- Wildlife biologist Miguel Ordeñana, now senior manager of community science at the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County, who first spotted P-22 while reviewing wildlife-camera footage in 2012. This wasn't his job; it was a labor of love for Ordeñana, who grew up across from Griffith Park.
- Sarah Picchi, the Los Feliz homeowner to whose backyard P-22 fled—for the last time—after being hit by a car. After his final capture, Picchi shared her photos of P-22 widely with the media. ■

LYNELL GEORGE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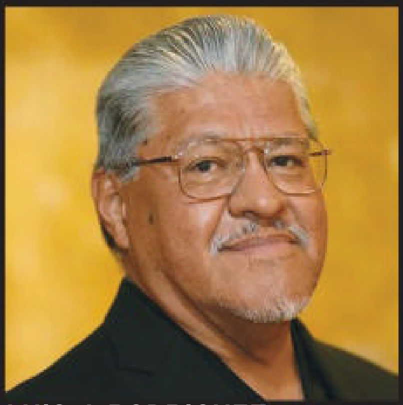
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Venture at Your Own Risk

There's nothing like surviving a terrifying plummet into chilly Northern California waters or dodging a falling stalactite deep beneath the earth's surface in Utah. If danger calls to you, here are six activities to try this spring. But we must warn you—these thrills are not without peril, so proceed with caution.

PHOTO BY ALAMY

SPORT CLIMBING ▸

CALICO BASIN, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

A mere 20 miles from Sin City lies another alluring place to test your luck: Calico Basin. The geographic marvel features gorgeous sandstone walls where rock jocks of different skill levels can try their hand (and foot) at sport climbing—in which ascents have established routes. The basin's myriad crags boast hundreds of courses with names like Mr. Choad's Wild Ride and Synapse Collapse, offering a range of difficulty and fear factor. Not quite ready for ropes? Calico has plenty of bouldering spots as well.

GETTY IMAGES

◂ FLYBOARDING

COLUMBIA RIVER, HOOD RIVER, OREGON

Dock your jet ski. Flyboarding has taken off in the Columbia River gorge, where windy conditions earned the town of Hood River the title Windsurfing Capital of the World. Boots attach your feet to a small board. Two jet skis power you. Hovering over the water on twin propulsive plumes, you lean to steer and can dive below the surface, then launch back out like a missile. Flyboarding looks extreme, but it requires minimal training and just a life jacket, a helmet, and a local outfitter.

CLIFF JUMPING ▸

BIG TIT, FOLSOM, CALIFORNIA

High in the cliffside along a section of the American River stands a bulbous granite outcropping that has long beckoned local cliff-diving enthusiasts. The spot offers one of the tallest jumps in the area and views of the Folsom Bridge. Whether you're trying to hit that gainer or just looking to feel your heart drop into your stomach, this approximately 50-foot leap comes through. But be careful: it's essential to check for boulders and debris hidden below the surface as well as for depth, and a strong undertow makes it necessary to hop out quickly, or you could find yourself pulled down the river.

KEVIN FISCUS

SPELUNKING ▸

TIMPANOGOS CAVE, AMERICAN FORK, UTAH

The typical payoff for trekking 1.5 miles along a steep trail is a handsome view, but at Timpanogos Cave National Monument, it's the cool, dark belly of the earth. Sure, the three-and-a-half-hour hike is guided, but it's hardly a cinch. Wear sturdy boots to safely explore the coral fossils, greenish helictites (think: ceiling made of gravity-defying mineral formations), and yellow-streaked walls of this subterranean kingdom, as jagged rocks and tiny passageways require some finagling to navigate.

▲ SANDBOARDING

YUMA DESERT, YUMA, ARIZONA

Contemplating a board-based thrill, but stuck between hitting the coast and taking to the snow? Why not head to the desert instead? The steep dunes that spread across the border of California and Arizona are the perfect place to try sandboarding, a blend of surfing and snowboarding. Many desert daredevils shred at the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Center on the California side of this expanse. Summon your grit, grab a freshly waxed board, and surf your way across a sandy slope.

PHOTOS BY ALAMY

◂ HANG GLIDING

FORT FUNSTON, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

It's a bird! It's a plane! No, it's the Fellow Feathers taking flight from the California coast. Intrepid members of the local hang gliding group soar year-round (weather permitting) from this military fort turned national park. Fliers must be members of the Fellow Feathers and also the U.S. Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association; they also need to have, at a minimum, an intermediate hang glider pilot rating—meaning this spot isn't for beginners. But befriend a Fellow Feather approved to be a tandem pilot, and you too can cruise above the coastline—sandy bluffs to one side and the vast Pacific Ocean to the other. ■

—Jessica Blough, Elizabeth Casillas, Nasim Ghasemiyeh, Aaron Gilbreath, and Ajay Orona

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WHY I WRITE

By CLAUDIA RANKINE

Because Here Is Nowhere Steady

I write because the world seems out of order. One reads and reads and the language attaches to some dictionary's idea of meaning in vague and inexact ways. In the end it all seems to be, as my daughter once said, triage language. Words address proximity to meaning but not the meaning itself. The word "meaning" is inadequate to the scope of experiencing a thing, its activity, its context, its history. A group of Black policemen brutalize a Black man at a traffic stop. Three days later, he dies in the hospital. How does one fully understand the brutality contained in that? How do we approach the meaning of the word "brutality" here? Do inhumanity and self-hatred create a dance as a life slips away?

We live adjacent to expression. The words, like some people, are trying. The stories are trying. The reports attempt to locate. The fictions live close to the nonfiction, but all utterance loses its way. All utterance is wayward. People are fucked-up and liars and cheats and brutal and naïvely sincere or falsely sincere or blatantly insincere or extremist melodramatic narcissists or blind to themselves and others or human. We shovel words toward some approximation of a thought, but the thought is already failing because the reality is already fading or far enough from the mark to make utterance preposterous or an understatement. That's not what happened. But of course things are happening. Meaning is being made. Lives are lived and lives are lost.

Everything lives and has lived. All is easily said and then written down in a "creative way." Even journalism winks at us with its clarity. Here it is. See? But what do we see? The language again fails to reflect because its object is a moving target of a world out of order and on a collision course with itself. With so much writing now there is no longer a sense of a future. What to do when there is nothing to do? We the writers are also out of order, and therefore our words are out of order too.

Poetry lives in the vagaries. It knows the jig is up. It skips around and in between without landing anywhere because here is nowhere steady. The poem makes nothing happen even as it survives, as Auden said, because it is unrealizable and unreliable. It makes no claims of fiction or nonfiction; it exists in the line or in the sentence; it remembers; it forgets; it's awake; it's asleep; it dreams. And yet the unsaid gets said somehow in what's unsaid between the lines. In the realm of feeling, the poem creates a phew or an ouch, a fuck or a shit, a damn or a wow. There is shadowy meaning even in the silences—the white space on the page.

I write because the world seems out of order. It's deeply personal, this backed-up flood of feeling. I live closely with the I-know-nothing sense of things. Getting rid of the illusion of knowing and replacing it with feeling-what-I'm-seeing helps. I read a César Vallejo poem in translation, so already far from the intended guttural responsive expression communicated through one's mother tongue and still I couldn't forget it. With me remained not just the poem but also the world Vallejo was trying to express: "There are blows in life, so powerful ... I don't know!" Then I read a poem by Paul Celan with these lines: "two / mouthfuls of silence." Yup. This kept happening. Dickinson. Hughes. Toomer. Again and again I found in poems language that expressed the disorder with no ideas of how to triage. Looking back, I see this made some kind of sense in a senseless life.

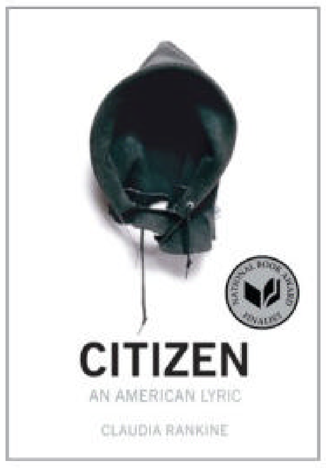
I write in order not to have to create anything outside our ordinary disorder. I try to write from my position of being fucked-up, destroyed, disheartened, dismantled, disassociated by the disorder and yet here with gratitude and delight in small moments of kindness. The structures of my books are governed not by convention but by an attempt to reflect the disorder. Now that a realized disorder is both the recognized reality and an illusion of order, I try writing inside the buoyancy of my disgust, distrust, despair, and exuberance at being able to feel everything. The writing brings a shape to my disordered feelings. The shape does not create order, it's just a shape to place experience. It's "a shape to fill a lack," to echo Faulkner's Addie Bundren, before everything returns to its out of order disorder and it is again difficult to write. ■

Claudia Rankine is the author of five collections of poetry, two plays, and a collection of essays. She has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Lannan Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

WHY YOU SHOULD READ THIS

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* is a book that breaks the rules. Blurring the lines between prose and poetry, essay and image, it operates as a hybrid of form as well as voice. Opening with a sequence of brief second-person narratives, this is a volume of the body, of the physical (as well as emotional and spiritual) toll of racism. A neighbor calls the police on a friend who is at your house babysitting. An acquaintance tells you "his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there." The offhand nature of these observations is the point. What Rankine is doing is building muscle memory, incident by incident. She is creating, or re-creating, trauma on the page. "Didn't feel it the first time?" she explained to me in a 2016 *Paris Review* interview. "Here it is again. We don't get there by saying it once. It's not about telling the story, it's about creating the feeling of *knowing* the story through the accumulation of the recurring moment."

That notion of the recurring moment is everywhere in *Citizen*. After its opening sections, Rankine pivots into a set of public narratives involving Serena Williams, Trayvon Martin, and Mark Duggan, the 29-year-old British Black man killed by police in London in 2011. "'The purpose of art,'" Rankine writes, quoting James Baldwin, "'is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers.'" That's a useful rubric for her work.



For Rankine, the so-called answers reflect what we don't want to see as much as what we do. That's one reason *Citizen*, like its precursor *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, eschews narrative in favor of something more experiential. Narrative, after all, is something we impose, a story we tell ourselves. This means it is necessarily contrived. Rankine is seeking something less digested. She is seeking to disturb rather than to reassure.

This is most explicit in her use of mash-ups, which create a collage in book form. In a section on Zinedine Zidane, the French soccer player who headbutted an Italian opponent for making racist comments during the 2006 World Cup, she appropriates the words of Baldwin, William Shakespeare, Frantz Fanon, and Ralph Ellison. She also interweaves images manipulated by her husband, photographer and filmmaker John Lucas, for a video series called *Situations*.

Such material is collaborative—between Rankine and Lucas, but also among the author and the voices she invokes. The effect is to create on the page some aspect of the collective, literature as an act of social conscience. "It always surprises me," Rankine once observed, "when people say that the realm of the lyric is the personal and the personal is not political.... When you think of a poet like Yeats, how can you say politics is not in the poem? When you think of Milosz, how can you say politics is not in the poem?" ■

—DAVID L. ULIN

PHOTO BY CALEB LEE ADAMS

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CALIFORNIA

BOOK CLUB

MAY 18

TELEPHONE

BY PERCIVAL EVERETT

Join us for a free Zoom event featuring Percival Everett in conversation with John Freeman. Learn more at californiabookclub.com.

Q&A

By David L. Ulin

A Conversation with Percival Everett

Percival Everett is uneasy discussing what he does. A 2021 Pulitzer Prize finalist for the novel *Telephone*, he is among the most prolific, and provocative, of contemporary American authors, yet he's more interested in his readers—how we inhabit (and, in a very real sense, animate) his writing. Among its other benefits, this point of focus allows him a certain equanimity. "I don't feel stress about work," he confided recently. "I'm very fortunate in that way. When I sit down to work, I don't have to do any throat clearing. I just start working. I start where I stopped." For this reason, perhaps, reading Everett's novels feels like participating in an ongoing conversation with an acute and inventive observer of the world. Recently, he and I spoke about his writing over Zoom.

You've long insisted that story is made by the reader, as opposed to the writer, that literature is a collaborative art.

Even I, as the writer, am a reader when I go back to the work. It's always different. When people ask me who's my audience, I can't imagine one, since everybody's different. So my audience has to be myself. I write for myself, knowing that at any given time I'm not the same person that this was created for. The writer who made it is gone and no longer exists. So what it meant to that writer is gone too. The only meaning that's left is to be made by whoever is reading it at that moment.

***Telephone* pushes at precisely this sort of porousness because there are three separate versions of the novel.**

If it's crazy to appeal to an artist for the meaning of their work, I thought, What about the audience? Can I challenge the way they're reading? How? And, of course, the way to do it is to be sure it's possible for certain readers to see something different from what other readers are seeing. In *Telephone*, it's essentially the same story in all three versions. Yet there are some differences, and those small, even tonal, changes do something to the meaning that gets made. Meaning is not only fleeting and shifting but always multiple. There are lots of meanings—layers of meanings—everywhere. You can watch a drug deal and read it from a block away. You notice in the way the dealer touches the buyer that there's a relationship. Some people would see that, and some people wouldn't. Some people would see the intimacy but not the deal. This, too, is a form of reading, so the idea of reading, I think, needs to be more expansive. Our reading happens all the time. Think of the ways we talk about football. The quarterback reads the defense. We talk about police reading the behavior of people on the street. That's the same notion of reading I think we should come to a text with, that we're entering an environment. We have to be aware of a lot of things, and meaning gets made not only by the movement of characters through space but by the tone that's employed when they move through space and the sort of psychological and philosophical furniture that inhabits the space through which they move.

Yes, reading as dynamic. Reading as an act.

Reading is not passive. It's performative. In fact, it is the most subversive thing that we do because no one does it with us.

And no one does it *like* us either. When I'm reading, I'm having a one-on-one interaction not only with the text but also with the writer…

…and my one-on-one interaction is completely different from anyone else's, and it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the writer. In fact, the fascinating part is that it's an interaction you're having not only with the writer as that person existed in one moment but also with the writer you've created.

Why do you write?

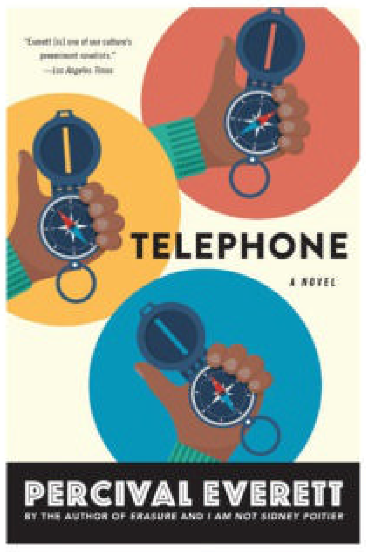
All the work comes differently. I don't outline; I do it in my head, come up with what I consider sort of a map. I feel the shape of the work, and I wish I could explain what I mean when I say that. But the interesting thing about maps is that a map functions for me as an excuse to get lost. It gives you a certain kind of security that allows you to wander into a place you don't know. There are all sorts of things that have to be exact for the map to work, one of them being scale. Another is the talent of the person who made the map. But it allows you the freedom to get lost in a territory. Writing books for me is really an excuse to study. I find something, and I start reading, and I get excited. Then I start working. It's surprising where you end up. You start with something blank, and then there's something there. But I'm not very good at talking about that stuff. ■

David L. Ulin is Alta Journal*'s books editor.*

WHY YOU SHOULD READ THIS

In his novel *Telephone*, Percival Everett embraced the mutability of narrative. How? By publishing three versions, each distinct in certain small but noticeable ways. Originally, the intention was to keep this information in the background, but the pandemic—the book, or books, came out in the spring of 2020—altered that plan. "With the strangeness with the COVID-19 isolation," Everett told the *New York Times*, "it was a decision in the house to do the reveal earlier than later." This may be the only time the author has found himself behind the curve.

Everett, after all, is among our most unpredictable writers, an innovator in the most capacious sense. During a career spanning more than 30 books, he has exuberantly defied expectations, of his readers and of himself. His most recent novel, *Dr. No*, frames a meditation on nothingness through the lens of a James Bond parody. *The Trees*, which came out in 2021, is both a searing examination of lynching and its legacy and an over-the-top detective story that has its roots in the 1955 murder of Emmett Till. Then there is 2001's *Erasure*, in which a professor named Thelonious Ellison (the names are intentionally allusive) is told his work isn't Black enough, which leads him to write a novel based on, among other sources, Richard Wright's *Native Son*. That work, *Ma Pafology*, is included in its entirety in *Erasure*, functioning as send-up as well as critique of a culture consumed with easy answers to complex realities.



A similar sense of inquiry motivates *Telephone*. Narrated by Zach Wells, another professor (of geology this time), the book is a reflection on transience and loss. Such elements imbue the caves where Zach performs his research, and they infiltrate his home life when his adolescent daughter, Sarah, is diagnosed with Batten disease, a degenerative disorder that is fatal, but not before it strips away cognition and memory.

Here, we see the logic behind releasing three iterations of the narrative, since Zach is confronting not only conditionality but also powerlessness. He can do nothing to help his daughter; he can do nothing to help himself. Meanwhile, the story develops in its multiple directions like a game of telephone. Part of this is ontological; like all of us, Zach lives at the mercy of circumstance. But even more, Everett suggests, we must remain present and engaged. "People, and by people I mean *them*," he writes, "never look for truth, they look for satisfaction. There is nothing worse, certain painful and deadly diseases notwithstanding, than an unsatisfactory, piss-poor truth, whereas a satisfactory lie is all too easy to accept."

How much do I love this observation? It feels right, for one thing, and the ruthlessness gets to the center of Everett's work. The idea of three variants of the same narrative may seem, on the surface, like a gimmick, but in fact it's a way of asking necessary questions, not least by decentering Everett's own authority. All truth, in other words, is unsatisfactory. It's what we do with it that counts. ■

—David L. Ulin

PHOTO BY DUSTIN SNIPES

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JUNE 15

INTERIOR CHINATOWN BY CHARLES YU

Join us for a free Zoom event featuring Charles Yu in conversation with John Freeman. Learn more at californiabookclub.com.

Q&A

By David L. Ulin

A Conversation with Charles Yu

When Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* won the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction, it took a lot of people by surprise. The novel, which addresses, among other issues, the stereotypical ways Asians have been characterized in Hollywood, was written in screenplay format, a strategy that might seem unusual. Yet Yu has long been a boundary pusher; his debut novel, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, revolves around a time machine mechanic named—wait for it—Charles Yu, who essentially rewrites the fiction in which he is living, even as we read. Recently, Yu and I corresponded by email about his exhilarating, groundbreaking work.

Why write *Interior Chinatown* as a screenplay? What did it offer you?

The screenplay format offers the ability to work on two levels: "inside the story" and "outside the story." Willis Wu, the protagonist of the novel, starts outside and desperately wants in. He gets there, eventually, but in the process, he has to negotiate some boundaries. To have a character, Willis, dancing in and out of a story, it helped immensely to have a clear delineation. A script provided that, both visually and conceptually. Readers can see what is inside the story (the script) and what is not (Willis's inner monologue, told as stage directions or asides). Willis being trapped inside that construct, of a story where someone else is in control, is a core idea of the book.

You've always been a world builder. Was the process different here than in your previous work?

It was much longer. First, I had to find the form. Then, I had the challenge of understanding the "rules of the world." I had to accept that these rules aren't like gravity or laws of science or anything that strict. There are some features that are implied. The world of *Interior Chinatown* is delicate, I think, and it does have its own internal coherence, but you have to sort of soften your gaze like with one of those Magic Eye stereoscopic illusions and just be in it, if that makes sense.

In 2014, you became a writer for HBO's *Westworld*. What's the relationship between writing for the page and writing for television?

The main thing—and this is obvious, but it took me surprisingly long to understand it—is that television is a visual medium. Prose means nothing in TV—or very little. You're drafting blueprints that many people (production and lighting designers, costumers, actors, directors, cinematographers) will use to generate visual images. It's also a tangible and highly practical medium, constrained by money, time, physical reality. When you write a book, you are director, actor, set decorator, everything. You have an infinite production budget, limited only by your imagination. You can conjure an entire universe for one sentence, then discard it. Writing for television has made me more concise and less precious. I'm not sure those are unequivocally good things, but in many contexts they are.

You've had an idiosyncratic journey as a writer. You started as an attorney and wrote when you could. How has that changed now that you write full-time?

While I was a lawyer, I dreamt of unlimited writing time. What I realized after quitting was that the job had been a tether that helped in a few ways: (1) I got material; (2) working a day job freed me from feeling like writing had to pay the bills; and (3) most important, it took away some of the psychological pressure to produce, since I had another job. Now, the challenge (and I know it's a privilege to have a "problem" like this) is to feel sufficiently invested, to make sure I'm doing things that I'm compelled to write. To write about things that will actually make a reader think, feel, laugh.

***Interior Chinatown* took a long time to coalesce. What was the process?**

I got a contract in 2011, began writing in 2012, thought I was almost done in 2013, realized I very much wasn't done in 2014, started writing for *Westworld* right before 2015 and stayed on until 2016, finally figured out what I was doing in 2017, reworked the internal logic of the book throughout 2018, and finished in 2019. It was published in 2020, right as the pandemic began. In that time, I wrote, scrapped, and reconceived the book no less than three times. It was a long road, but worth it.

Why do you write?

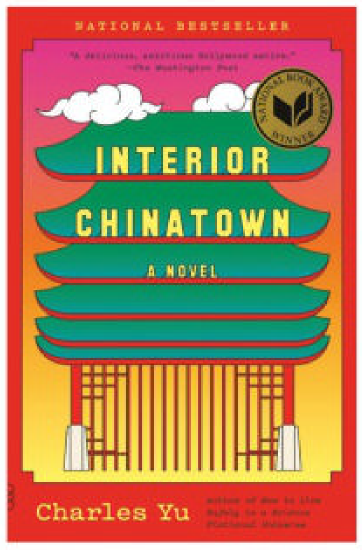
I write in order to connect with others. The most exciting and awe-inspiring places I've been are spaces created by writers, worlds I entered through the point of view of a fictional character. I feel immensely lucky to be able to do that for others, to bring them inside someone's head or to their planet or universe or cubicle. ■

David L. Ulin is Alta Journal*'s books editor.*

WHY YOU SHOULD READ THIS

"You're here, supposedly, in a new land full of opportunity, but somehow have gotten trapped in a pretend version of the old country," Willis Wu declares in Charles Yu's National Book Award–winning novel, *Interior Chinatown*, which was published in 2020. It's a deft encapsulation of how the book operates. What Yu is after is to tell a story that comments on itself even as it operates in three dimensions, a meta-narrative in the most vivid sense. Built around the figure of Willis, an actor on the television police drama *Black and White*, the novel is presented as a screenplay; hence its title, which echoes the convention of establishing location in a script.

It can be a heavy lift to write fiction using such a format. Screenplays, after all—much like the films that grow out of them—generally don't allow for introspection. They are driven by external action rather than a sense of inner thought. Yet that works perfectly for what Yu has in mind, which is to destabilize us as readers by immersing us in a superficial realm defined by stereotype. For the most part, this has to do with the fate of Asian and Asian American actors in Hollywood, relegated to bit parts as long-since-clichéd cultural signifiers, what Yu characterizes as "Kung Fu Guy" or "Old Asian Man." At the same time, the use of script as a structure reminds us of the artificiality of this, and every, novel, the necessary contrivance of all narratives.



Yu is funny and Yu is pointed, but *Interior Chinatown* is more than a send-up. Rather, it might be said to function similarly to Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel*, in which the more outlandish the situation, the more perversely naturalistic it seems. This works because, like Yamashita, Yu is intent on highlighting—not least through the casual racism his characters face—all the ways reality can be immoderate. "How much does it do to your psyche to say, I don't see myself and other people don't see me as somebody who could be in this kind of story or this kind of life?" he pondered in an interview after receiving his National Book Award. "You can't be the main character; if you're in the story at all it's a very specific kind of role or really as background or furniture, and that kind of takes away your personhood."

Identity, in other words, which relies (how could it not?) on the ways we are allowed to express it, our selves contingent on the lenses through which we are seen.

For Yu, it's a central motivation—here as throughout his body of work. Fiction, for him, is a matter of inquiry and interrogation, less an attempt to reflect the surface of the world than it is an excavation of the contradictions underneath. When it comes to *Interior Chinatown*, that involves exploiting the outrageous to remind us that what are really outrageous are the stereotypes and tropes many people take for granted every day. If a novel can be a mirror, that's what Yu has created here, reflecting a shadow history through humor, yes, but also through compassion and outrage. ■

—David L. Ulin

PHOTO BY DUSTIN SNIPES

By Lynell George • *Illustrations by* James Ransome

the search for mardou fox

She was the inspiration for Jack Kerouac's *The Subterraneans,* but who was Alene Lee?

My whole life has been one long waiting to gain entrance.

—Alene Lee

I never expected to find her in this unlikely place, "sitting on the fender of a car in front of the Black Mask bar on Montgomery Street." And yet, here she was. Lingering within the first few pages of a sleek black paperback, taking up space, "saying something extremely earnestly," setting ideas afloat.

This was my first glimpse of Mardou Fox, one of a constellation of urban intellectuals dubbed "the subterraneans"—night dwellers, "'hip without being slick…intelligent without being corny…they are very quiet, they are very Christlike.'"

I wasn't sure where I'd wandered, but I locked into its frequency.

At the time, the early 1980s, I was a quiet yet intensely restless English major, working shifts as a bookstore clerk in a fading shopping mall in Los Angeles. One slow weeknight, my hand lingered over a stack of slim paperbacks on our to-be-shelved cart.

The 1981 Black Cat edition of Jack Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* featured a high-contrast black-and-white cover image offset by highlighter-yellow and green type. Beneath the title, bodies crowded together, suggesting a cellar-like setting.

I read on.

"Do you know this girl, the dark one?"

"Mardou?"

"That's her name?"

The exchange both gave me pause and nudged me forward.

I had gone a round with Kerouac. I knew about the impact of his work. A few years before, I had visited my local library looking for *On the Road*. One copy remained. The others, the librarian speculated, had likely been filched, a testament to the book's general scofflaw message.

I snatched it up. I don't recall where I hit the brakes, but I do remember why. I couldn't get past the mile-a-minute carnival show that was Dean Moriarty—the exclamations,

the tumbling headlong after "chicks" and "kicks." It wasn't for me—wasn't *meant* for me.

I might have returned it early.

This book, *this* tone, was casting a different spell.

By the second page, Kerouac reveals that the book's beguiling central character, Mardou, is "a Negro." That ignites a flare of ambivalence in the novel's narrator, Leo Percepied—Kerouac's thinly veiled fictional persona—who is a self-described "Canuck." Mardou is not set dressing. She is standing in the "warm summernight" trading questions, theories, poetry. She is vivid, even in her muted affect and cool tones. She becomes, in a lightning-strike moment, this "unself-confident man"'s object of desire. A muse. And, looking back, she becomes mine, too.

While Mardou was not a figure I expected to find in Kerouac, neither was she someone I had encountered in other fiction—a woman of color as compelling counterculture figure, self-scripting a sometimes-messy version of independence. She was my way in—to Kerouac and to something beyond.

THE SUBTERRANEANS recounts the brief love affair between Mardou and Leo. Kerouac boasted he'd written it in three days and nights, during the fall of 1953, on a Benzedrine high. It wasn't the romance that pulled me in; it was the milieu and mood. The blasting bebop, the boisterous bars, the breathless conversations expanding deep into the night—and here was a woman, Black and Native, centered in the narrative: a key figure, the prize lost.

Those early, drifty pages make for a magnificent montage: I could hear Sarah Vaughan, Gerry Mulligan, and Charlie Parker through a scrim of warm radio static and eavesdrop on the ragtag revelers discussing the same poetry I was studying. The backdrop was San Francisco's North Beach—a location already magic in my mind. Even though nothing was *happening*, paragraph to paragraph, everything seemed *about to*.

Then there was the enigmatic Mardou: "She sat in the corner, by the window, she was being 'separated' or 'aloof' or 'prepared to cut out from this group' for her own reasons.—In the corner I…tried silent communication, then quiet words…North Beach words, 'What are you reading?' and for the first time she opened her mouth and spoke to me communicating a full thought."

I snapped the book closed; those subterranean scenes vanished. Our little bookshop began to fill with post-workday customers—attorneys, stockbrokers, film-industry types—looking for thrillers, romances, and diet books. But I'd already gleaned something. That evening, I purchased my first Kerouac. I took it home, absorbed it. It became part of the new library I was building; it became part of my library of self.

IT WAS MARDOU, the sophisticated big-sister figure, who held the door open for me—to these books, to their worlds. I hurried after, as if slipping into the secret entrance of a club. Over time, I found myself pulled into some of Kerouac's other work: his later novels and, too, the wide-ranging writing experiments, scattered with delicate vignettes about the sacred earth, the dreams that change us, the energy of jazz, and the condition of the heart.

I discerned that Kerouac's fiction was memoir; his characters, part of the "legend" of his life. So, from the beginning, I wanted to find Mardou. Early biographers referred to her only by the fictional name Kerouac had given her. Later, some swapped in "Irene May," her alias in his *Book of Dreams*. For decades, I combed memoirs, journals, letters, and later online forums, hoping to learn her identity. Eventually, I counseled myself to let it go.

But I couldn't seem to.

This year marks the novel's 65th anniversary. A new Grove edition, published in late 2022, has been updated with a reading group guide, exploring questions of race, gender roles, and the book's blurred genre lines. I have, of course, added it to my collection, next to numerous editions in hardcover and paper, in English and French.

I've reread *The Subterraneans* more times than I can count, always finding something new—an image, a phrase, a question to hold up to the light. But if Mardou had been companion and muse for Kerouac, she fulfilled those roles in a different way for me. In the novel, as things shatter, she coolly proclaims, "I want to be independent like I say."

In so doing, she sets herself free.

I needed an example, *that* example.

She'd had to retain her autonomy, her equilibrium. As a Black woman at the threshold of my 20s, in spaces that weren't always welcoming, I understood that so would I.

IT'S GIVING NOTHING AWAY to say that Mardou and Leo's relationship is ill-fated. His fear and ambivalence cloud his ability to see things as they are.

Yet back in the 1980s, I was listening for something else: a young woman who could read the territory and who refused to contort herself to so many worldly men's parochial thinking—from wincing essentialism to not-so-casual racism and misogyny.

When the book was published in 1958—just a year after the cultural event that was *On the Road*—it received some withering reviews. Kenneth Rexroth lacerated Kerouac in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "I sincerely hope that the Negro girl of this sad, lost, marijuana-clouded, 'therapist'-bedeviled story never actually existed, or at least that Kerouac himself is not the hero, because seldom has a man understood a woman less."

Rexroth was correct about Kerouac's inability to see Mardou and to convey her inner life. But somehow, her quintessence shines.

After publication, the real Mardou Fox assiduously avoided attention. For decades, she didn't just desire but also demanded privacy. Kerouac had rummaged through her intimacies to write a book. She felt safer in silence.

In that silence, there has been room for creative speculation. I'm still trying to settle for myself the enigma—who she was, yes, but even more why she matters so much to me. Academics (Harryette Mullen, Baz Dreisinger) have studied the space around her absence; musicians (Carleen Anderson) have adopted her persona as a signal and a vibe. Kerouac set a captivating ambience in motion, but for Mardou herself, a full story has yet to be told. Whether or not I wanted to cop to it, I was like a Kerouac figure, shambling after her.

GROWING UP, I was never drawn to princess stories. I wasn't looking to be rescued. The world told me to be ready. I was looking for open doors, room to create—laboratories where things happen, transform. There was something beguiling about Mardou, in her black velvet pants and "mad long scarf," matching pace. Even then, I knew I wasn't looking for a person exactly, but a plan.

I launched myself, making pilgrimages to North Beach, City Lights Bookstore, nosing around the cold, echoey rooms, finger tracing spines and jackets, hoping to find a biography or memoir, or, better, some sort of collaged glance-back at that gone world through the eyes of a Black female bohemian.

Later, as a reporter, I wrote essays, profiles, and features about the arts and literary life—often exploring the Beats. I interviewed figures of the era, attended readings and conferences. It was not lost on me that, like Mardou, I was often the only Black woman in the room. A curiosity. I always hoped for an anecdote. Or, better, that she might be in the shadows, prepared to speak her piece.

Eventually, a suggestion of a form took shape. She was there in fragments, quotes, asides, descriptions. Who was this woman who held her own? Who pushed back, who walked away to save herself? I drank up what I could find—not about what is now an antique affair, but about what it meant to survive.

As books about the Beats appeared, I would, unfailingly, turn to their indexes. I watched her aliases change, tracked the erasure.

Fox, Mardou.

Mardou Fox.

Irene May.

Aileen Lee.

And finally: Lee, Alene.

It was peeling the skin to get to the fruit, careful not to harm it: Alene Lee.

Learning her name elevated my hopes. Perhaps she was ready to speak. As a participant and observer, Black and Native, she would be positioned to tell a story from a unique region of the Beat generation, unfiltered, in full voice.

But just as my excitement crested, I learned devastating news.

Lee had died in 1991.

I'd assumed there would be time.

She was 60 years old.

THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE, Allen Ginsberg documented his many chapters and coconspirators in lyric lines, vivid journal entries, and intimate black-and-white photographs. Because of his prescience, we have a vital visual record.

About the time Lee's name surfaced, in the early 1990s, images, too, emerged. Aside from an elegant three-quarter headshot, cropped close, that played up the symmetry of her face, there was a series by Ginsberg: a candid of her, foregrounded, in a group in the poet's Lower East Side living room; another, casually posed, of Lee with William S. Burroughs seated on a rooftop—above where much of the real-life action of *The Subterraneans* took place.

The rooftop photo captivates: an animated Burroughs, in horn-rimmed glasses and houndstooth blazer; Lee with an easy smile, hair covered with a long scarf. They lean toward each other; her hand rests on his.

In tight cursive, Ginsberg captioned the moment: "William Burroughs and Alene Lee, rooftop near Thompkins Park [*sic*] and Paradise Alley. Bill and I assembled Yage and Queer letters, Alene typed up the collaged manuscripts, Fall 1953."

Something tangible: a name, a face, a role, but more, a light in the eyes.

BORN ARLENE GARRIS in Washington, D.C., Lee spent her early years in New York City's Staten Island. Restless, she was drawn to Greenwich Village, its pace and energy. According to Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee's oral biography *Jack's Book*, she picked up jobs as a telephone operator and worked for a time at a social services agency near Astor Place. Then she found employment with a health-book company, run by a former editor at New York's daily newspaper *PM*.

Lee met Kerouac in 1953, when she was typing those manuscripts for Burroughs and Ginsberg. Their turbulent affair, detailed in Kerouac's "tearbook," was sabotaged by the author's unaddressed equivocations and fixations—heavier than any rucksack he'd ever carried. "Jack was terrified of getting emotionally involved," writes Barry Miles in *Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats; A Portrait*. "The problem arose when Jack began to fall in love with [Lee], which in turn activated his neurotic urge towards self-destruction. He began drinking heavily." The dissolution was ineluctable.

He also deceived her: "When Jack asked her to sign a release form against libel," Miles continues, "he lied to her that his work was being published by *Evergreen Review*," which she assumed "would only be seen by other writers and literary people." Reading the manuscript, Lee recalls in *Jack's Book*, "I went into shock. A lot of it was still raw.... These were not the times as I knew them."

Lee wasn't prepared for how "thoroughly autobiographical [Kerouac's] fiction had become," writes Gerald Nicosia in *Memory Babe*, or for the liberties he had taken with her thoughts and motivations: "the ridiculous speeches he had put in her mouth."

Well past their breakup, they went together to the Village Vanguard, where Kerouac was performing a set of jazz poetry. This was just after the publication of *On the Road*, which sent a generation on ecstatic journeys of mind, body, and soul. "[He] was speaking on stage, and he was drunk," Lee recalls. "...It was all out of kilter and awful." The sobering surprise came later, when Kerouac updated Lee on the status of *The Subterraneans*. "I asked: 'Which magazine?'" she tells Gifford and Lee. "He said, originally a magazine was publishing it, and now he tells me it's a book. I said, 'You said it was coming out in a magazine on the West Coast.' He said, 'That's what you wanted to hear.'"

One more unmooring turnabout. Past and present, taken together, make it clear why Lee might choose silence at the risk of erasure.

NOT UNLIKE THE tattered copies of *On the Road* disciples carry, *The Subterraneans* has been my accompanying text. Mardou, like Leo, is a wayfarer, who has to regroup time and again to pull herself from chaos. In a hierarchical America, their freedoms are two-tiered, discordantly defined.

Within the space Lee left, I began imagining: Speculative vignettes. Essay fragments. I pictured Mardou dreaming at her writing table, pencil in hand, striking out and inserting, a caret between two phrases, a query in the margin—opening up new words, new worlds.

I was beginning to accept that whatever tale was left to tell, she might have died with it. Then, a number of years ago, I happened upon something that felt too good to be true—an essay, "Walking with the Barefoot Beat," by Christina Diamente. It appeared in *Beatdom*, a journal dedicated to Beat studies, edited by David S. Wills.

In the piece, part corrective, part manifesto, Diamente revealed that she was Lee's daughter and that she had made a deathbed promise to her mother to "keep [her] alive." Because Lee had "fiercely (and legally) demanded anonymity," she had become a secret—an omission with consequences beyond the absence of a name.

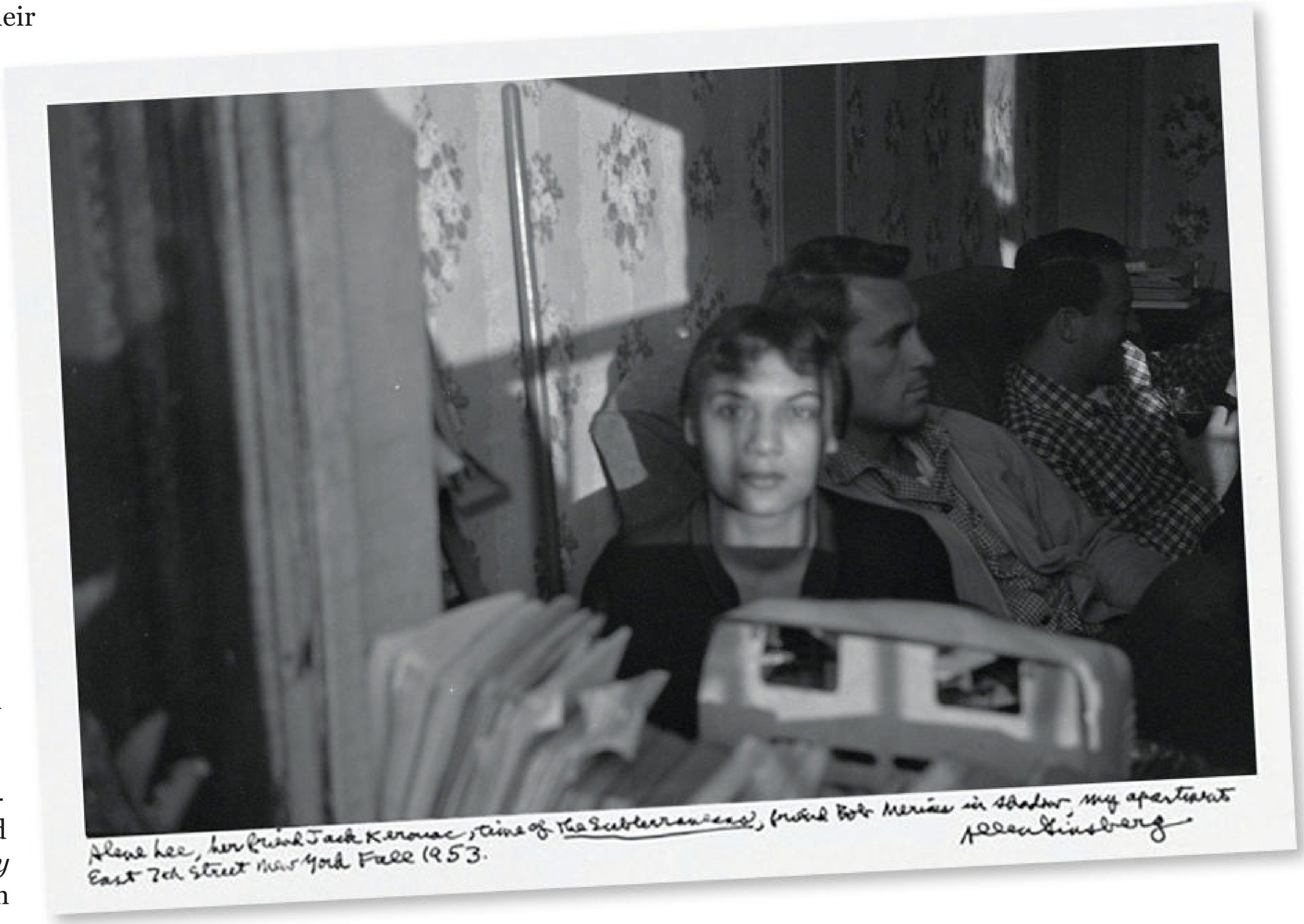
In a pair of pieces, Diamente unveiled fragments of her mother's writing. Finally, *her* voice, the world through *her* eyes. Staten Island in the 1930s and 1940s, Lee wrote, still hinted at "the wilderness that once existed there." She recalled "the Dutch Huguenot section where we used to fish and wander. The organ grinder man and the monkey who picked your lucky number for a nickel...the West Indians who were the first blacks to own their homes, and the hatred between them and the southern Negroes." Diamente alluded to unpublished journals, letters, drafts. "Excerpts from a woman, who never stopped writing."

I waited impatiently for the next installment.

Months, then years, passed.

A full decade.

It did not come.



Alene Lee, her friend Jack Kerouac, time of The Subterraneans, friend Bob Merims in shadow, my apartment East 7th Street New York Fall 1953.
Allen Ginsberg

PHOTO BY ALLEN GINSBERG, © ALLEN GINSBERG ESTATE, 2023

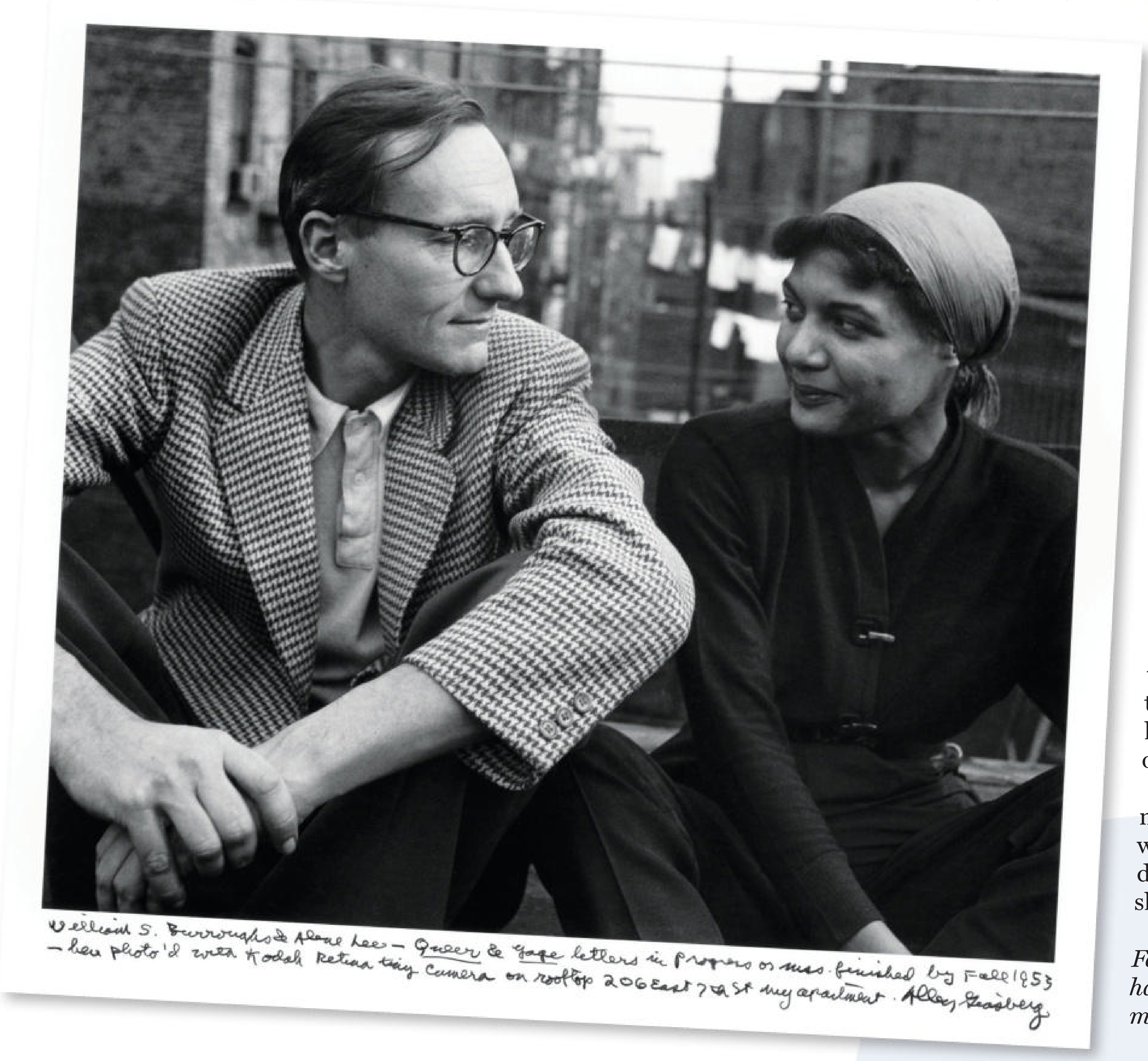
MARCH 12, 2022, marked the centenary of Jack Kerouac's birth. To commemorate the milestone, Wills dedicated *Beatdom* No. 22 to the author's short life and long legacy. I reached out. If nowhere else, I hoped that I might find Lee here, that Diamente might have reappeared. "As for the book/thesis," Wills emailed back, "I don't know what happened except that it has never been published. The ways she spoke about it implied that at least a draft of it had been completed." But since then, Wills told me, she had fallen out of touch.

Another ghost.

I had no choice except to keep shadowing Mardou. During a recent search, I landed on a blog titled *The Last Bohemians*, launched in 2005 by poet Edward Field and journalist Dylan Foley, about the history of Greenwich Village.

Diamente rematerialized here, participating in a wide-ranging telephone interview, posted in April 2022, about her mother's Village years, her writing, and the complicated afterlife of Mardou.

What struck me were the relentless demands on Lee. "Being involved with Kerouac," Diamente said, "made her a kind of target. She would walk down the street in Greenwich Village where we lived and total strangers would walk up to her and say 'I hear you are Mardou.'… What kind of person in New York City stops a stranger to talk about their sexual experiences with a writer?… She spent the rest of her life trying to stay out of the spotlight."


William S. Burroughs & Alene Lee — Queer & Yage letters in progress or mss. finished by Fall 1953 — her photo'd with Kodak Retina tiny camera on rooftop 206 East 7th St my apartment. Allen Ginsberg

I was left with a disconcerting afterimage of Lee: not of liberation but of struggle, of sorrow and quick moves and dire consequences. All these years, I had hoped for "wings," for her to have traveled lightly. I had to ask myself, Despite my antipathy, was I looking for a storybook ending, after all?

Diamente divulged more about her mother's orbit—her relationship with John Mitchell, Diamente's father and the founder of storied Village coffeehouses including the Gaslight and Figaro; her friendship with the painter Virginia Admiral; her complicated liaison with journalist and Kerouac comrade Lucien Carr. But reading about Lee's hard luck and fragile mental health, I began to understand that the cost of reliving and retelling old dreams, losses, and calamities might have been too much.

For so long, even the suggestion of Lee's presence had filled an essential gap. When *The Subterraneans* fell into my hands, I was attempting to construct a story outside what was expected of me, as a Black woman with aspirations that were not seen as "practical" or "on track." I understood her "restlessness," her "strangeness."

Those traces only made me crave more: What of her dreams? Her passions? What did she hope to come to know? Now that yearning had been tempered by the toll it had taken, leaving me to detect an unsettling echo.

"I want to ask everything, can't, don't know how," Leo ponders. I've become Leo as he presses, cajoles, "What is the mystery of what I want from you?"

Am I asking too much? Is it *mine* to understand?

Lee's quest to disappear was at odds with my wish to know.

IN THE DECADES that Lee filled journals, started and abandoned stories, she and an editor at Grove Press determined that her "forms" weren't "commercially viable." Perhaps the work didn't confirm or conform. Perhaps it cut a new path.

Lee was of an era when many Black women's stories were sidelined, undertold, or misconstrued. (The 1960 film version of *The Subterraneans* erased Mardou's ethnicity, casting French actor Leslie Caron.) In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya Hartman writes of the survival strategies Black women deployed at the dawn of the 20th century. Such women were, symbolically, Lee's spiritual forebears, reimagining what a free life meant when the world worked to constrain everything about them: "Young black women were radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise."

Lee pulled back to protect what was left. I'm grateful she found time—while typing those men's books and papers and more—to partition off intervals for work of her own. In that gap, that open question, she left me room to shrug off hidebound strictures and write a life; I didn't need a map, but permission.

Lee's loose, memoirish "Sisters," published in *Beatdom*, reveals her hardscrabble beginnings, the large and complicated family, the Great Migration–traveling North Carolina ancestors. We glimpse the world from which she was breaking free: "I had never belonged to any group…and became more conscious of the world around me."

We see her, guiding herself through books, through new territory, casting words into a future only she could write for herself. Freer than her grandmother, and her mother, she set forth on her own.

I'm reminded of the Rita Dove poem "Canary," which takes as its subject a Black woman with whom Lee shared space in the bohemian demimonde: Billie Holiday, who was as fragile as she was strong.

> *Fact is, the invention of women under siege*
> *has been to sharpen love in the service of*
> *myth.*
>
> *If you can't be free, be a mystery.*

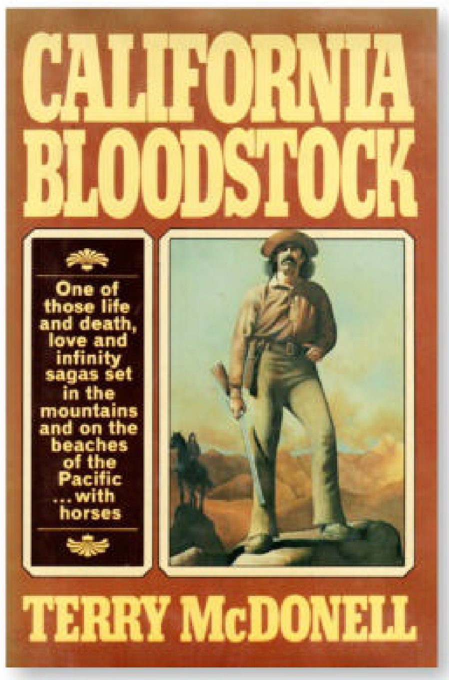
Something similar might be said of Lee. In "Sisters," she props open another door for me, speaking at last for herself:

> *One morning I woke up and knew that I could get something and be something that I didn't have to ask anyone for and nobody could take away from me.*
>
> *I could feel harder, think harder and take riches from the world that they couldn't stop me from having cause most people didn't know they were there for the taking.*
>
> *And nobody could stop me from having them as long as I didn't let them know what it was I wanted.*
>
> *And that became mine, my dream.*
>
> *And being black didn't matter, cause…nobody could take from you what they didn't know existed.*
>
> *And all I had to do was guard it, and believe in it and it would be mine some day.* ■

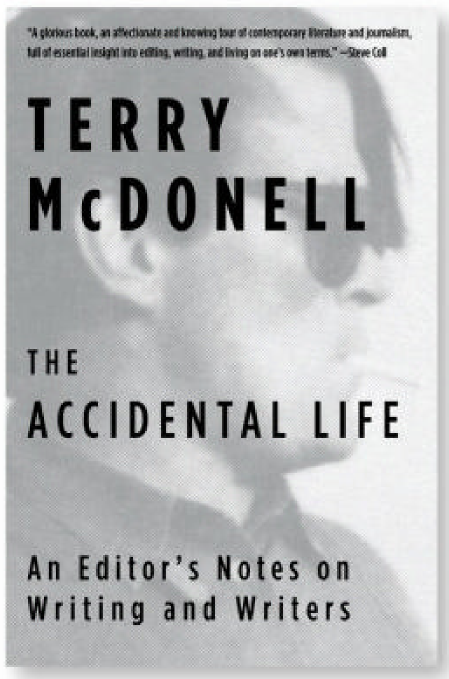
Lynell George is an award-winning Los Angeles–based journalist and essayist.

PHOTO BY © ALLEN GINSBERG/CORBIS

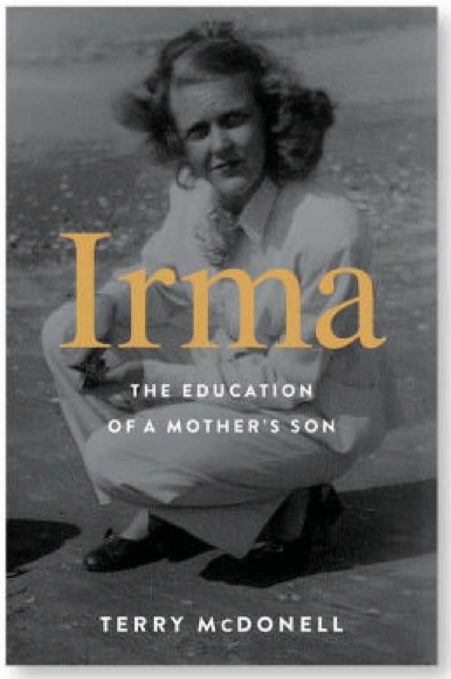
TERRY McDONELL'S CALIFORNIA TRILOGY


CALIFORNIA BLOODSTOCK
One of those life and death, love and infinity sagas set in the mountains and on the beaches of the Pacific ...with horses
TERRY McDONELL

***CALIFORNIA BLOODSTOCK* (1980)**
Macmillan, 209 pages,
out of print



***THE ACCIDENTAL LIFE: AN EDITOR'S NOTES ON WRITING AND WRITERS* (2016)**
Knopf, 384 pages, $26.95



***IRMA: THE EDUCATION OF A MOTHER'S SON* (2023)**
Harper, 256 pages, $25.99

READ AN EXCERPT FROM *IRMA* AT ALTAONLINE.COM/IRMA

HIS MOTHER'S SON

By Will Hearst

The California Gaze

Together with his novel and earlier memoir, Terry McDonell's *Irma* defines a uniquely West Coast perspective, one of perpetual curiosity and self-discovery.

California is both a state of mind and a physical place, its sensibility shaped by geography, conflict, and experience.

It was the Left Coast even before the Europeans arrived. This slender edge of the continent was the place human beings came after they likely wandered across the Bering Land Bridge and from which they pushed farther south, to warmer weather, richer hunting grounds, on their way, eventually, to the southern tip of South America.

Centuries later, the density and complexity of Indigenous tribes, cultures, and languages in the land west of the High Sierra had become a human continent unto itself.

Merely a few decades after Columbus, the Spaniards came, and then Portuguese ships, followed by Russian fur traders, English navigators, and then, much later, droves of northern Europeans traveling from what we call "back East." There was Lewis and Clark, although they reached the Pacific Ocean by way of the Columbia River, in present-day Oregon. In the 1820s, Jedediah Smith wandered into San Gabriel from the Mojave Desert. After him came the great land grab of the 1840s, which was hyper-accelerated by the gold rush of the early '50s—the Silicon Valley boom of its day.

To each era, California offered yet another dream of wealth, an escape from the confines of older civilizations, one with only slight regard for the immigrants who had come before and even less for the land's Indigenous inhabitants.

Which authors have been the literary chroniclers of this complex and multilayered sequence of civilizations that underpin contemporary society? Richard Henry Dana? John Muir? John Fante? Walter Mosley? Father Juan Crespí? Ana Castillo? Maxine Hong Kingston? Ishmael Reed?

That list and debate will go on for as long as people read. And there is no correct, or best, answer. You reveal who you are by whom you pick for your list, your own nominees for the California canon.

So here are my three. Joan Didion, whose voice, subjects, and cadence make vivid my own experience. Kevin Starr, whose amazing histories documented the smallest details and largest themes of the Golden State. And finally, Terry McDonell, who grew up here and has written about the West in three books that constitute a virtual trilogy.

It's perhaps too much to impose on an author the existence of a trilogy when the author has not suggested such a thing. Admittedly, he has also written a collection of poetry, *Wyoming*. But bear with me. I'm not predicting that the Library of America will soon issue a single volume of all three books with a silk ribbon to mark your place.

What I'm suggesting to you, dear reader, is that these three books, taken as a whole, present a kind of Rashomon vision of the Western ethic. To be more precise, and more fair to the author: Each book is a meditation on the author's origin story, his personal world line—a portrait of the artist—but also on the universal effort to see ourselves as part of a greater narrative. Each asks, How do I place myself, how will I be placed in the pageant of history, arts, letters, legend?

Let me explain, taking the books in publication order.

California Bloodstock, from 1980, is a third-person novel haunted by the notion that modern and ancient California are linked in a blood pact. The book is not written in a straightforward narrative style like that of Richard Ford or Didion, but rather in a series of short scenes. Like a screenplay without stage directions. The characters' speech patterns and actions advance the narrative. One is constantly aware of how the sound of the novel is both ancient and modern, how there is a throughline from the villages of ancient California to surf-culture lingo and ultimately to the modernism and the patois of the current day.

It's a virtual road cut through the layers of our history. As a cult novel, *California Bloodstock* has gone in and out of print over the past 40 years but deserves to be more studied and appreciated, perhaps assigned as required reading for a younger generation that probably knows of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and might have seen the movie *Little Big Man*. *Bloodstock* is a difficult book written in an era when universities and critics were not accustomed to confronting the genocide that took place in California.

The author's blunt and colorful language, sentences written with the economy of Ernest Hemingway, describes a brutal world. The elegance and mood of the tale are reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*—itself a novel that is not considered to be literal truth but that depicts a greater truth about the treatment of America's Native population.

PHOTO BY THOMAS McDONELL

Terry McDonell with a photo of his mother, Irma, and father, Bob, who died during World War II when the author was five months old. McDonell writes, "Irma loved Bob more than she ever loved anyone, even me. I know because she told me that...to make me happy. I never saw her cry."

McDonell's book presents the mid-19th-century epoch with brutal realism. But throughout these stark and elegiac paragraphs, one detects both irony and dark humor. As though the actors in this drama knew all along how absurd and doomed their own stories, and rationalizations, would become in the light of history. *Bloodstock* is not an apology or a romance but a meditation, an entertainment, on the theme of an alternative western narrative that will prove the lie to storybook history.

The second book, in my putative trilogy, is *The Accidental Life*, published in 2016. It's a straightforward memoir that seems on the surface to have little relevance to the point of view of California or the West.

The book consists of a series of tales about the interactions between the author and a vast variety of American literary writers—many of them encountered during McDonell's years as a top editor of magazines, from *Esquire* to *Sports Illustrated*.

McDonell was known for having a strong viewpoint, which some writers found difficult. In the end, it was his view that there might be many ways to tell a story, and perhaps you could consider some alternatives.

Is that a uniquely Californian ethic? I'm not sure. But McDonell brought to his job, and his memoir of the editing process, a preference for clear and authentic speech.

I know from personal experience. In my time working with him at *Outside* magazine, there were moments when he would suggest a change, albeit considerate about what I was trying to say; perhaps the way I was saying it was not tracking. He'd offer that it might work better another way, this way.

His editing style could feel critical, but often the next day I'd wake up to say, No, he's right. I have my story upside down. The last paragraph should be the first. It will work better that way. McDonell was a genius with story structure and organization.

There is a wonderful anecdote in the book where McDonell is introducing Kurt Vonnegut to some of the folks at *Newsweek*. It's a long and festive dinner, and they ask Vonnegut one of the questions people always ask: "About his work habits, his hours, stuff like that. When did he write? 'All the time,' Kurt said. 'That's all I do.' He let that settle, stirred his drink with a long finger and added, 'You could say I'm writing now.'"

It's a funny story because you realize that a fiction writer is indeed working all the time, noticing life moment by moment. And yes, he might be writing a scene from a future novel right now as you ask him your question.

McDonell is writing all the time too. And that is the pleasure of *The Accidental Life*.

I will submit that *The Accidental Life* is not a deliberate exploration of the western point of view. Not on the surface, anyway. But it does, by reflection, reveal the author's view of the whole writing project. And we moderns cannot accept any literary summary without knowing the author's history, background, and taste.

Finally, we come to McDonell's new book, *Irma*, which of the three offers the most direct meditation on the West, even though it appears to be a biography written by a dutiful son of his devoted and complicated mother.

I don't know of anything else like it. Perhaps in empathy for a powerful female figure, it recalls Jim Harrison's *Dalva*. My guess is that McDonell's book became a voyage of discovery of his mother, but also a chance to unravel his own origins and impulses, a rethinking of his own life events, from the changed viewpoint, the inevitable greater perspective, that comes with age.

With luck, we arrive, finally, at the age of our parents, if not grandparents. So, the telescope becomes inverted.

It's an original literary technique, a memoir in the form of looking at your own life experience through the mirror of another person, a person so close to you that her life, and your reflection in it, cannot be told in the third person.

McDonell was essentially raised in a single-parent household. His re-creation and reimagining of his mother's life—with the compassion and understanding attained by looking back—form the core of the book.

McDonell's father died during World War II, when the author was just five months old, depriving them of the chance to become a bonded pair. McDonell was essentially raised in a single-parent household. His re-creation and reimagining of his mother's life—with the compassion and understanding attained by looking back—form the core of the book. But there is lots of California culture here: Santa Cruz, surfing, football at Cal.

Irma is a beautifully crafted book. Its rich language and sharp, poignant descriptions are suggestive of James Salter at his best. In her way, McDonell's mother was the inspiration for his eventual emergence as a premier editor and writer. Irma was the person who gave initial direction to the author's life.

> *When he was in junior high school, Irma told him if he liked girls they would like him back, and they did. Now he liked women, and was drawn to women others found difficult. They were more interesting simply by not going along, sometimes busting him for not paying attention or showing off. Like Irma, in a way, but, of course, not. He was aware that women not letting him off the hook for this or that might be good for him, might be helping him* evolve, *in the argot of the day.*
>
> *Little by little, he started listening more carefully to them. One told him the greatest gift you can give a lover is the thought that you are both alive at the same time. Proust, he thought. She smiled sweetly at him and explained Joyce's thinking that a good enough writer could awaken the experience of being alive every moment. He loved that.*

McDonell believed, and his friends thought it made sense, that his dad had been a fighter pilot. Probably that was why he and Salter got along so well.

I have known a few pilots in that class. The ones I met, some of whom had made it to the Blue Angels team, were not the Tom Cruise version, with a lot of frat boy banter and locker room towel snapping. They were quiet people, more like surgeons than jocks, and they were really good at what they did. They resembled elite athletes in the sense that they had physical skills that are not widely shared in the general population.

They also had that attitude, ready to kill but also get killed themselves—so they were natural-born existentialists. In the trailing pages of the book, McDonell comes to realize that the fighter pilot story is not quite true. His dad did die in a plane crash—and probably saved a few lives, by avoiding occupied buildings. But not as a fighter pilot.

Myth is sometimes stronger than fact. One wonders, at the end of *Irma*, whether McDonell was a kind of warrior himself, willing to do battle for his writers, his clarity of vision, his team, possessing special skills—and tracing his character back to the courage and adventurous spirit of his mother.

Memoir is memory. And like all memory, it shifts and changes in the retelling. Proust was correct: the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new sights but in looking with new eyes.

Irma is a sparkling book. It has the economy and power of language found in *California Bloodstock*. It has the literary sophistication of *The Accidental Life*. But it has the vulnerability, tenderness, and gratitude of a son who made good. ■

Will Hearst is the editor and publisher of Alta Journal.

ALAN HEATHCOCK
Sweet, Soft, Plenty Rhythm
a novel by Laura Warrell
STORY
Elsewhere
Sindya Bhanoo
ON THE ROOF TOP
THE EVERY
DAVE EGGERS
INTER STATE
ESSAYS FROM CALIFORNIA
A NOVEL
LYDIA MILLET
FIONA and JANE
JEAN CHEN HO
LIKES
SARAH SHUN-LIEN BYNUM
LESS IS LOST
ANDREW SEAN GREER
RUTH OZEKI
The Book of Form and Emptiness
Zero Zone
A Novel
Scott O'Connor
MICHAEL CONNELLY
THE DARK HOURS
THE FURROWS
NAMWALI SERPELL
THE PERFECT SOUND
MacARTHUR PARK
JUDITH FREEMAN
mouth to mouth
antoine wilson
TIME
ORWELL'S ROSES
REBECCA SOLNIT
RUDE TALK IN ATHENS
MARK HASKELL SMITH
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GOLDEN STATE MYTH

By PETER FISH • *Illustrations by* STEVE CARROLL

IMPERIAL DREAMER

More than a century ago, Harold Bell Wright's bestseller *The Winning of Barbara Worth* promised California it could make its deserts bloom. Now we're paying the price.

The Barbara Worth Country Club is a par-71, 6,500-yard golf course that spreads out on the fringes of Holtville, in California's Imperial Valley. Like many desert golf courses, it has an apparitional quality: a square of deep green gleams against a surrounding landscape of ochers and grays. The fairways—"straight-up Bermuda grass," explains course manager Steve Rogers—are pillared with palm trees. Ponds flank the greens, reflecting a powder-blue sky.

The course gets its heaviest use between October and May, when temperatures run in the 70s, as opposed to the 100s they reach in July. After their matches, golfers can head to Caddies Bar and Grill for a beer. A nearby hallway is crowded with framed, signed photographs of celebrities who played the course or performed at the adjacent hotel and convention center. John Travolta, Oliver North, Charo. Also displayed are photos from the club's early years, after its opening in 1930.

The club's nine-decade history and its forthright, sporty name may convince you that Barbara Worth was a real person—say, a pioneering female golfer, a contemporary of Patty Berg and Babe Zaharias who founded the club after a successful pro career. That is not the case. Barbara Worth exists in the pages of a novel and in a silent film. She was the creation of Harold Bell Wright, the most popular and influential California writer no one today has heard of. Together, author and heroine propelled California's favorite story about itself: that given will and engineering prowess and water, the state can be whatever it wants to be. Whether that narrative still holds, in the Imperial Valley, in California, and across the whole American West, is the question.

THE VALLEY

The Imperial Valley lies 100 miles east of San Diego. If you study one of those plastic relief maps of California displayed in elementary schools, the valley looks as if someone had pressed hard on the plastic with a thumb: an oblong indentation sunk between two mountain ranges, the Chocolates to the east, the Lagunas to the west. On its north end, it's bounded by the Salton Sea, at 325 square miles California's largest lake. Its official southern boundary is the U.S.-Mexico border, although the valley continues into Baja California under the name Valle de Mexicali, running south toward the Gulf of California.

The valley is hot and dry. Annual rainfall averages three inches. Temperatures exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit more than 100 days a year. Despite the extreme climate, the area has for millennia been home to Cahuilla, Quechan, and Kumeyaay peoples. European and American exploration and settlement was halting: the Anza expedition traversed the valley in 1774, and the California gold rush brought argonauts seeking riches. It was a brutal trek through terrain that 19th-century journalist Bayard Taylor damned as "scorching and sterile—a country of burning salt plains and shifting hills of sand."

It was an unlikely place for a preacher turned popular novelist to alight. But in the fall of 1907, that was what Harold Bell Wright did.

"He was kind of like the James Patterson of his day," says Deborah Thornburg, a historian at the Imperial County Historical Society's Pioneers' Museum, which devotes a substantial amount of floor space to Wright. "Everybody read him."

Wright was born in upstate New York in 1872 and—as detailed in the definitive Wright biography, Lawrence V. Tagg's *Harold Bell Wright: Storyteller to America*—endured a childhood of soul-crushing hardship. Harsh, alcoholic father; loving mother who died young; the boy forced to quit school to eke out a living driving a grocer's wagon and working as a housepainter.

What saved him was a love for literature and for Jesus—these and the ferocious work ethic that comes from growing up poor and wanting never to be poor again. Wright took a post as a preacher in a backwoods church in the Missouri Ozarks, then moved to a church in Kansas. He began to write devotional novels: *That Printer of Udell's*, based on his hardscrabble childhood, and *The Shepherd of the Hills*, a tangled Ozark melodrama involving sin and art and redemption. Published by the Book Supply Company of Chicago, both were successful.

Then a leap to a church in California, in Redlands, 60 miles east of Los Angeles. And a second, more daring leap. Wright wearied of being a pastor; he could, he believed, spread the gospel to a larger audience through his fiction. He relocated with his family (wife, sons) to what would come to be called the Imperial Valley, where he built a ranch he named Tecolote, for the small owls that flitted around the property.

POSTAL TELEGRAPH

IMPERIAL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S PIONEERS' MUSEUM

The original Hotel Barbara Worth opened in 1915, just four years after the publication of its namesake novel. Located in El Centro, the seat of Imperial County, the building was destroyed by fire in 1962.

Walk through the Wright exhibit at the Pioneers' Museum and you see what he made of his time in the valley: there are first editions, manuscripts, awards, and photographs, black-and-white images of his handbuilt arrowweed writing studio and of Wright himself. Handsome "in an angular way," judges Thornburg, "and look at those eyes." Tall and rangy, he looks like a man at home on horseback, which he was.

Wright arrived in the valley at an opportune time, transforming himself as the valley was transforming. The era of great western reclamation projects had begun—William E. Smythe proclaimed in his influential 1900 book, *The Conquest of Arid America*, "irrigation is a miracle!" Across the American West, dams, reservoirs, aqueducts, and canals would bring water from where it was—in rivers like the Colorado, the Owens, and the Snake—to where people wanted it, ensuring a new age of prosperity.

Few places were better suited to embrace this miracle than the soon-to-be Imperial Valley. The Colorado River flowed only 60 miles to the east. In 1901, the California Development Company made an initial cut—more would quickly follow—in the riverbank and directed the water into the valley. The developers gave the region its regal name and began to sell land. "People came from all over the world," says Thornburg.

Then, calamity. The winter and spring of 1905 were wet, and the Colorado River rose and flooded, overwhelming the hastily engineered cuts and canals to reroute itself into the valley, washing away homes and townsites and cropland and creating a new large body of water, the Salton Sea. Flood after flood followed over the next two years.

Harold Bell Wright knew a good story when he saw one. Holed up in his writer's studio, he plotted an epic tale of redemption through irrigation. His heroine, Barbara Worth, is orphaned as a toddler when her parents die of thirst trying to cross the desert. Rescued, she becomes the adopted daughter of the valley's most prominent citizen, banker Jefferson Worth. The shrewd, dynamic Worth is a believer in reclamation but must battle eastern capitalists trying to wrest control of the valley. Also on hand are two rivals for Barbara's affections: homespun local surveyor Abe Lee and suave eastern engineer Willard Holmes. And there is the Seer, a William E. Smythe–inspired character who embodies the faith Wright himself had come to hold: to reclaim the desert was to reclaim souls. There are gunfights and important telegrams, a biblical flood and the happy ending when Barbara, a bit surprisingly, chooses Willard over Abe.

Wright hit pay dirt. Released in 1911, *The Winning of Barbara Worth* was a phenomenon, becoming the third-bestselling book of the year. Over the next 15 years, sales would reach 2,800,000 copies.

To explain *Barbara Worth*'s success, historian Kevin Starr noted that the novel "tapped that amalgam of progressivism, profit, and religiosity so deeply lodged in the mainstream American identity of this era." All of which is true but ignores one other key component: Barbara Worth. Not since Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884) had a California heroine so captured America's heart. An expert rider, fluent in Spanish, Barbara is an Imperial Valley aristocrat with a democratic touch. Gazing out from the novel's cover, she is handsome rather than pretty, with strong features and piercing brown eyes, wearing a floppy sombrero and an expression at once dreamy and purposeful.

The Pioneers' Museum exhibit presents artifacts from Barbara's rise from literary figure to cultural sensation. There are the labels for Barbara Worth brand Imperial Valley grapefruit: "The Test Is in the Taste." There is a sofa from the Hotel Barbara Worth, the opulent Spanish Renaissance establishment that opened in downtown El Centro in 1915, whose lobby featured 11 murals depicting scenes from the novel and whose dining room menu included chicken liver en brochette for 60 cents.

By the time the hotel opened, the Colorado River had been pushed back into its former course, and a new network of canals had been created. The valley prospered. Its cities—El Centro, Brawley, Calexico—grew. Across the state, major new reclamation projects were underway: Los Angeles pulling water from the Owens Valley, San Francisco making plans to draw it from Hetch Hetchy. Were Harold Bell Wright and Barbara Worth chiefly responsible for these and later engineered transformations of California? No, but they made reclamation heroic and romantic.

In the summer of 1926, shooting began on a film version of *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, produced by Samuel Goldwyn and starring Vilma Bánky as Barbara, Ronald Colman as Willard, and a newcomer, Gary Cooper, as Abe. It was filmed in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, now best known as the venue for Burning Man. The stars and the 150-person crew endured sandstorms and temperatures that rose into the 120s.

On October 14, 1926, some 200 elected officials, civic leaders, and reclamation experts from 13 western states gathered in Los Angeles for the conference "The Winning of the West," where the focus was bringing water to the region's arid lands. Among the highlights was the world premiere of Goldwyn's film.

THE RIVER

Nearly a century after the politicos applauded the opening of *Barbara Worth*, the valley the film and book made famous is in crisis. Its sole source of water, the Colorado River, is withering as warmer temperatures reduce the snowpack that feeds it, one effect of what is looming as a once-in-a-millennium megadrought in the American West. River flows are 84 percent of normal. The Colorado's biggest reservoirs, Lakes Mead and Powell, are at record lows, skeletal versions of their prior muscular blue selves.

"The Colorado River basin is aridifying," says JB Hamby, a member of the board of directors for the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) and chair of the Colorado River Board of California. "It's going to be permanent in nature."

Despite its initial refusal to be redirected and reclaimed for irrigation, the Colorado River has been very good to the valley. The All-American Canal—the 1940 replacement for the earlier system—annually carries 3.1 million acre-feet of water from the river, starting

PHOTO BY CHARLIE NEUMAN

Historian Deborah Thornburg holds a contemporary edition of *The Winning of Barbara Worth* at the Pioneers' Museum in Imperial. Earlier printings of Harold Bell Wright's famous book and his original manuscript are on display in the glass case in front of her.

HAROLD BELL WRIGHT
MAY 4, 1872 - MAY 24, 1944
From Arrowweed Shack to the Silver Screen
The Winning of Barbara Worth
Harold Bell Wright
A Saga of Love and Rivalries Set in the Pioneer Days of Imperial County
Imperial County Historical Society

A recently planted field receives precious water east of Holtville.

just below Imperial Dam and continuing 80 miles west to Calexico, with branch canals sending water farther north in the valley.

The canals have their hazards. On a hot summer day, jumping into the cold, fast-flowing water can be tempting but deadly: across the valley, you see billboards on which a cartoon duck warns, "STAY AWAY, STAY ALIVE. NEVER SWIM IN CANALS." But the river water has made the valley one of the most productive agricultural regions in the nation, adding $4 billion to the Imperial County economy annually. Top crops include alfalfa, for cattle feed, and winter vegetables—spinach, lettuces. When you buy a packaged salad mix in February, there's a good chance it comes from the Imperial Valley, harvested by farmworkers who cross the border each day from Mexico.

The drought imperils that economy. At December's Colorado River Water Users Association conference, Camille Calimlim Touton, commissioner of the federal Bureau of Reclamation, said that the Colorado River basin's current system of dams, reservoirs, and canals is no longer tenable in a hotter, drier West: "It was built in the last century, and so the way that we operate for this hydrology doesn't work." The bureau is demanding enormous cuts in water use—ranging from two million to four million acre-feet—all across the basin, which takes in seven states and 40 million people. These cuts need to be made quickly and will be allocated through negotiations among the entities—states, irrigation districts like the IID and the Central Arizona Project, basin Indigenous tribes, others—that draw on the water. Historically, Colorado River negotiations have been notoriously fraught: in 1934, a squabble between Arizona and California over construction of the new Parker Dam led Arizona to call out the National Guard. Current negotiations may be worse, says Hamby. Coming up with these volumes of cuts, he says, is "extraordinary and huge."

The IID has a unique place in the fight. Western water law generally gives the first entities that take water from a river the right to keep taking it. Because the IID was one of the first to draw water from the Colorado, it controls 3.1 million acre-feet of its water—about 20 percent of the river-water rights in the United States. This is why Sammy Roth, who covers water and energy issues for the *Los Angeles Times*, calls Hamby and the other IID board members "five of the most powerful people in the American West."

Their power isn't limitless, though. When the Colorado River Compact—the landmark agreement allocating the river's water—was drawn up 100 years ago, Arizona had 330,000 residents; Nevada, 77,000. They now have seven million and three million respectively, with correspondingly increased water demands and political clout. Critics of the IID argue that the valley receives more water than is fair. They note that across the basin, agriculture accounts for 70 to 80 percent of river-water use, while cities draw much less. If you need to save two million to four million acre-feet of water, an agricultural valley might be the place to start.

That puts the valley, and the IID, in a difficult position. Hamby, a valley native who became fascinated by Colorado River issues when he was a student at Stanford, says, "The volumes are massive and nothing anybody's ever dealt with before." What he worries about most is pressure to pull land out of production—an idea being floated as part of the Colorado River allocation negotiations—by paying farmers not to grow crops and thus not to use water. Some valley farmers would accept that deal, he thinks. But if you take too much land out of production, you could decimate the local economy—the tractor dealers and crop-dusting pilots and hardware stores and "all the other community impacts that are hard to define, when you just don't have money in circulation and things just get less vibrant."

What happens when a farming valley no longer farms? Hamby says, "There's nothing really to replace it."

THE SEA

Drive north from El Centro and you will come to the Salton Sea, created by the floods of 1905–07. These deluges provide the climax for *The Winning of Barbara Worth* and allow Wright to indulge in his most grandiloquent prose: "The roar of the plunging waters, the crashing and booming of the falling masses of earth that were undermined by the roaring torrent were heard miles away."

The Salton Sea is also the story of today's Imperial Valley. From a distance, it is still oddly entrancing: a silvery-blue disk floating on the desert floor, a reminder of what it was like for much of the 20th century. Then it was a Ripley's Believe It or Not!–worthy oddity, frivolously entertaining and environmentally important. It was a key stop for waterfowl migrating on the Pacific Flyway. It was a quirky but lovable tourist attraction, with visitors spending weekends at seaside towns like Bombay Beach and gathering at the North Shore Yacht Club hoping to catch glimpses of Jerry Lewis or the Beach Boys.

All that's gone now, as visitors immediately understand once they actually reach the sea, shrunken, surrounded by dry lake bed, most of the tourist attractions boarded up. It depended on excess water from the Colorado River. As that water vanishes, so does this so-called sea.

As Salton Sea program director for the Audubon Society, Frank Ruiz has spent the past six years advocating for a sustainable Salton Sea that would provide critical habitat for birds and at the same time protect the region's health and economy. He can quickly enumerate the environmental losses the sea has endured in recent years. It has become more saline, drastically reducing fish populations. That in turn has reduced populations of migrating waterfowl. Earlier in the sea's life, Ruiz says, "400 different bird species used it." That number is down by a third. The Salton Sea, he says, "is at the brink of a major ecological collapse."

Ruiz came to environmental work after careers as a church pastor and in mental health, which inclines him to take a holistic view of the crisis. Human beings, he explains, are being harmed too. The valley already has one of the highest rates of asthma in California. As the sea recedes, exposing more cracked, dry lake bed, valley air will grow dustier, making asthma rates worse. As for the prospect of paying valley farmers to take land out of production, he asks, What about the valley's farmworkers? Will they get money too?

PHOTOS BY CHARLIE NEUMAN

The Holtville water tower is an Imperial Valley landmark, erected long before the current drought and the Colorado River's diminished flows.

He warns that the crisis is a foreshadowing of crises across the West. "The Salton Sea, it's just the tip of the iceberg of the many other Salton Seas that we are going to be dealing with in the West," he says, "such as the Great Salt Lake, Mono Lake." He doesn't even call the current crisis a drought. "This is the new normalcy. We need to learn how to adapt to the circumstances, because things are not going to get any better."

THE BOOK

Even in the Imperial Valley, there are no longer many people who read *The Winning of Barbara Worth* or any of Harold Bell Wright's novels, or who know who he is.

"We've forgotten him, really," says Thornburg of the Pioneers' Museum. When she was growing up in the valley, she says, "everybody still talked about *The Winning of Barbara Worth*." There was the hotel, there was Barbara Worth Junior High School in Brawley, there was Barbara Worth Road, there was the country club. Today, the former middle school teacher says, "most of the kids do not know."

There are reasons for the neglect. Reading *Barbara Worth* today can be a frustrating experience. It continually threatens to be a better book than it is. The melodramatic plot keeps you reading; the main characters are compelling enough. These strengths are swamped by Wright's fevered, adjective-clogged prose. His stereotyped ethnic characters—volatile Irishmen; gentle, subservient Mexicans—are even more off-putting.

But Wright was never going to be admitted into the pantheon of great American writers. *Barbara Worth* was just the start of his enormous commercial success. By the end of his life, his books had sold an estimated 10 million copies, making him one of the nation's bestselling authors. Still, four years after *Barbara Worth* was published, *The Virginian* author Owen Wister damned Wright in the *Atlantic Monthly* as a writer of "quack novels" that were "stale, distorted, a sham, a puddle of words." Wright was even less popular among Jazz Age literary critics. H.L. Mencken wrote that Wright's novels touched "such depths of banality that it would be difficult to match it in any other country." More caustic was a review in *Time*: "He is a Moses for morons."

There are still people in the Imperial Valley who value Wright and *Barbara Worth*, though. The IID's Hamby read the novel when he was in college, looking to learn more about his valley's history. He appreciates the way Wright established the importance of the Colorado River to the valley and of the valley to California. "So much of the history of the river and the way that the river is managed and operated, the rules, the law of the river, is because of what happened in Imperial Valley," he says.

And some people see Barbara Worth and Harold Bell Wright as talismans of a gracious, vanished valley that in real life might never have accepted them. John Cabrera grew up knowing nothing of the book until he learned about the ornate hotel that had stood in downtown El Centro before it was destroyed by fire in the 1960s. "If you're in the valley," he says, "there aren't a lot of historical landmarks. I thought it was fascinating to have something so big and beautiful and awesome, but no longer here."

HAROLD BELL WRIGHT
NATIVE SONS OF THE GOLDEN WEST
JAMES M. RILEY, GRAND PRESIDENT

CHARLIE NEUMAN

Local history buff John Cabrera at the historical marker near the site of Wright's ranch and adjacent to the Barbara Worth Country Club in Holtville. The plaque describes Wright as "America's favorite author."

Cabrera works for the Imperial County Office of Education and for AmeriCorps, overseeing a program that places tutors in Imperial Valley schools. In his spare time, he collects Wright memorabilia—copies of the novels, postcards featuring the vanished hotel. He has come to be captivated by Wright. "A conflicted man," Cabrera says. "I really believe that, because of his upbringing, the instability, the abuse, you could imagine."

He links his fascination with Wright to memories of his childhood, when he would join his gardener father on jobs trimming the lawns of wealthy valley residents, all of them white people. He would look at their big houses, wondering what it would be like to live in them. Wright and Barbara Worth gave him entry into that world, where you could dine at the Hotel Barbara Worth and order the chicken liver en brochette.

The demographic of Barbara Worth collectors is not the demographic Cabrera grew up with. But, he says, "where the collection and the connection comes is like, Hey, I'm part of your community, even though technically I don't belong. I'm the only Mexican there; everybody else is white and older. And yet they accept me."

THE DESERT

One of the things that surprise people about the Imperial Valley is how beautiful it is. Not everywhere. There are the sunblasted strip malls and the highways too wide for anything they lead to. But then, in the distance stand the sculpted mountains. There's the desert with its ocotillos and smoke trees, the sudden appearance of irrigated verdure: a kelly-green alfalfa field; a languid side canal snaking past a grove of date palms, something from *The Arabian Nights*. It's easy to understand Cabrera when he says, "I love the Imperial Valley."

What would happen if it all went away? It's hard not to wonder that while driving the valley after talking with Hamby and Ruiz and reading the newspaper stories about megadroughts and political battles and the new, arid normalcy. What happens when the Salton Sea shrinks to nothing, when lettuce fields are abandoned and towns fade?

It is, as Ruiz says, a question not just for the Imperial Valley but for other valleys across California, across the West, all the places that bet big on the romance of reclamation pictured in *The Winning of Barbara Worth*. So much of California, of the West, is built on romance, from Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* to Bing Crosby's "San Fernando Valley" to Tupac's "California Love." What happens when the romance ends? In a region where water is scarcer than we ever imagined it could be, which places do we keep and which do we abandon? It's easy to say about an old book, This is something we no longer need. It's harder to say that about somewhere people call home.

Wright stayed less than a decade in the valley that made him famous. In 1915, he was injured while horseback riding, then developed tuberculosis. He moved to Tucson, then known as a haven for health seekers. He built a hacienda on acreage east of the city and continued to write. His fame would transfer to Tucson maps: streets on the land of his now-subdivided estate are named for his books, among them Barbara Worth Drive.

Yet one can argue that Wright's most lasting legacy springs from earlier in his career. His second novel, *The Shepherd of the Hills*, has had a surprising afterlife. In 1960, it was turned into an outdoor pageant, performed in the small Missouri Ozarks town, Branson, where the story is set. *The Shepherd of the Hills Outdoor Drama* became the first attraction at what is now a major tourist destination. The pageant has expanded into Shepherd of the Hills Adventure Park, with its Vigilante Extreme ZipRider and 230-foot-tall Inspiration Tower.

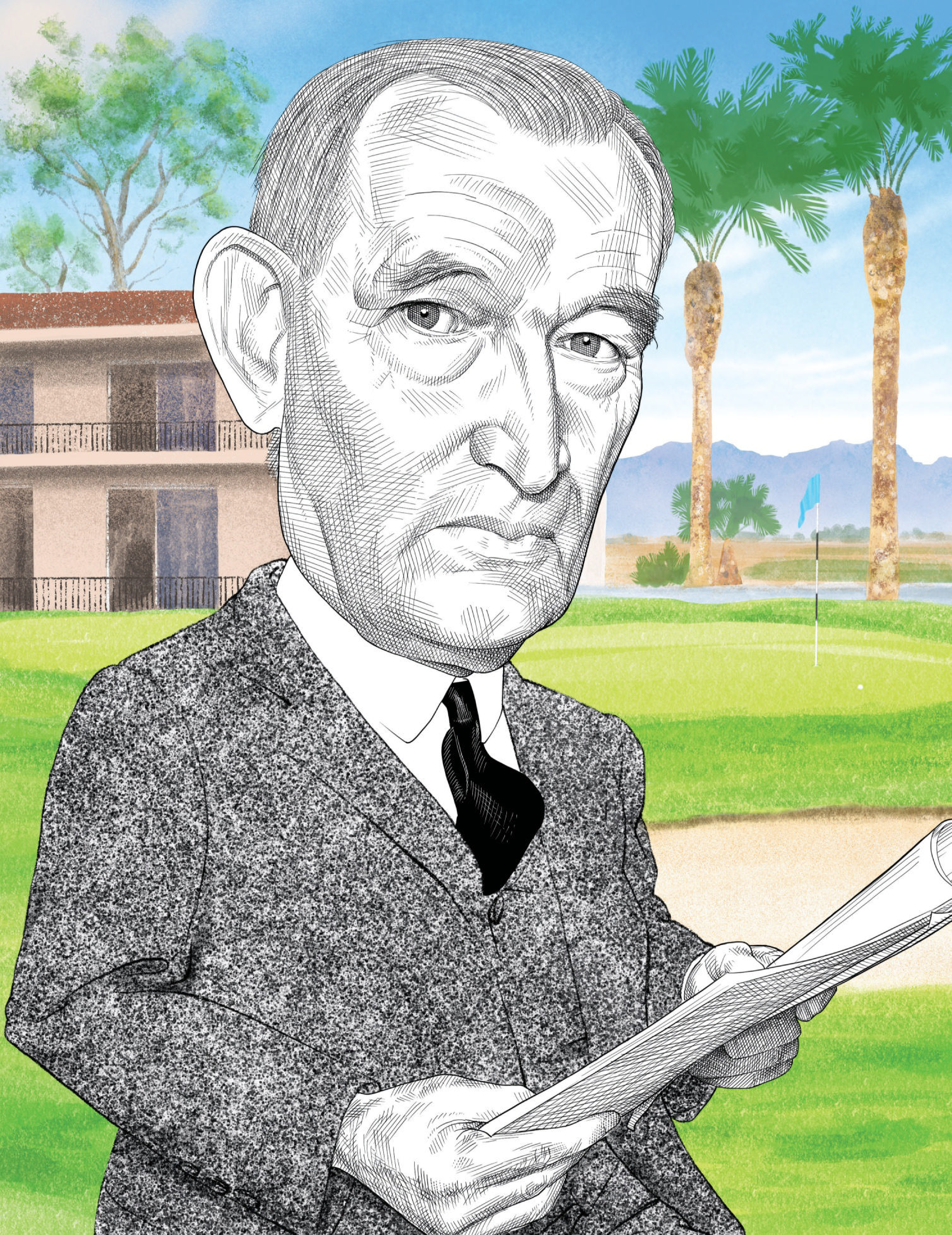
Near the end of his life, though, Wright returned to the Southern California he most loved, this time to Escondido. He kept writing, slowed by failing health, until his death in 1944. His remains are in a courtyard in the Cathedral Mausoleum in San Diego's Greenwood Memorial Park. His ashes were placed inside a copper urn shaped like a book, set in sand from the Imperial Valley, beside a stone tablet inscribed with words from Isaiah: "And the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose."

At the Barbara Worth Country Club, manager Steve Rogers and owner Eddie Mejorado are working to bring back the luster the club had in its heyday, restoring greens and fairways in the hope of drawing new generations of valley golfers. Even now, if you stroll the course in the late afternoon, when the low sun slants on the palms and ponds, it retains a kind of magic, as does the valley. It is possible to imagine a world where the land Harold Bell Wright dreamed of became the land that still is, where Barbara Worth and Willard Holmes enjoy the happy ending Wright wrote for them.

Say they're in their 60s now, still vital and fit, but they've stepped back a bit from Barbara's business interests and Willard's engineering firm to let the kids take over, to have more time for fun. They ride horses; they drive up to the Salton Sea for gimlets at the North Shore Yacht Club.

And they come here, to the country club that bears Barbara's name. She's a scratch golfer, better than Willard, but he's a good sport about it. She stands at the first tee, swings her MacGregor driver in an assured arc, hitting the ball so true that it lifts over the watered greens and fairways, the shimmering canals, over a valley that has and will always have all the water it ever needs. The ball soars as if it could go on forever. ■

Peter Fish is a writer, editor, and teacher specializing in California and the American West. He lives in San Francisco and wrote about Point Reyes Books for Alta Journal *11.*



By Jessica Zack • Photo by Christie Hemm Klok

'The Last Black Calligrapher in San Francisco'

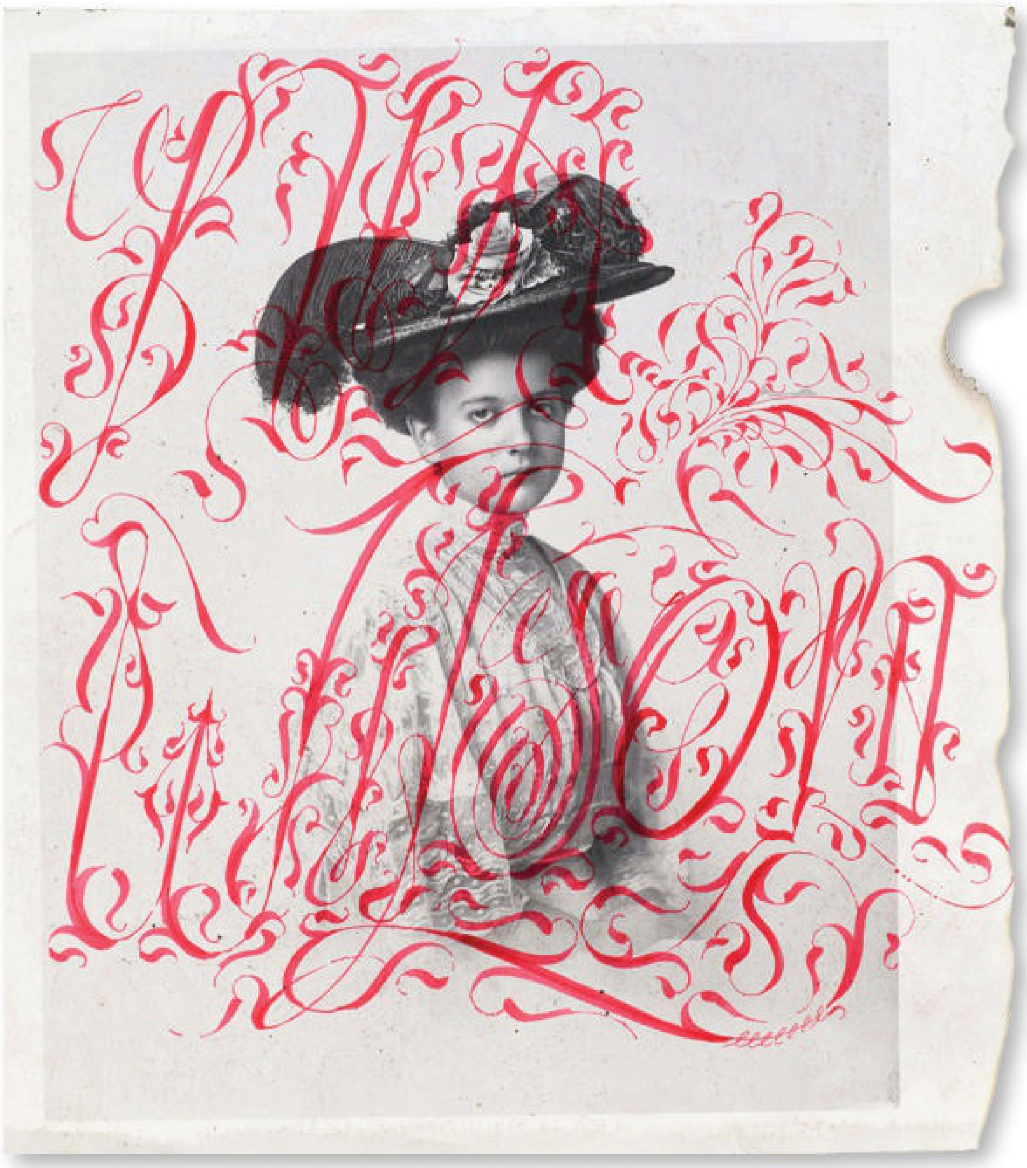
Hunter Saxony III relies on centuries-old calligraphic techniques to create conceptual art that explores identity, justice, and mortality.

In the days following the brutal murder of a Black teenager at an Oakland BART station in 2018, Hunter Saxony III created the series *Nia Wilson / Say Her Name / No Silence*. Saxony penned Wilson's name in delicate, scrolling red ink across 1930s magazine photos of wealthy white southern families posing in their finery. He had found the images years earlier at a secondhand shop in Austin, Texas. For the series, he charred the edges of the pages, singeing them to suggest a "history that shouldn't be told, the dots we'd like to disconnect," he says. "The burning is for societal ugliness that should have been manicured into an American dream by now but clearly hasn't."

Saxony, who calls himself "the Last Black Calligrapher in San Francisco," is a conceptual artist who uses centuries-old calligraphic techniques in unexpected ways to probe ideas about self-discovery, mortality, and injustice. An image from his *Nia Wilson* series is on view (in person and online) through April in the exhibition *Strikethrough: Typographic Messages of Protest* at San Francisco's Letterform Archive, a graphic design, typography, and calligraphy museum that acquired 20 of Saxony's works for its permanent collection. His first commercial solo exhibition in San Francisco—featuring new and old work—opened in March at Eleanor Harwood Gallery, in the city's Minnesota Street Project. "I love how formal his work is and that it's also shrouded in mystery because of the obfuscation and the elegant frills around everything," says gallerist Harwood. "You really have to sift through to see its essence, and when you're trying to figure out what you're seeing, you end up more in abstraction."

Saxony created a number of similarly haunting works in 2020 and 2021 as a way to process the racially motivated murder of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia and the police killing of 24-year-old Breonna Taylor in Kentucky. *Whose Race Are We Running…from (for Ahmaud)* is especially potent, with the name Ahmaud in large, florid script over a vintage image of five white men competing in a hurdles race. In *Double Dutch Lamentation (for Breonna)*, slightly blurred words can be made out on the reverse of Italian parchment paper.

"Hunter uses 19th-century ornamental techniques to create something that actually feels much more contemporary than many lettering and graphic design artists," says Stephen Coles, Letterform's editorial director and associate curator. "It makes you realize right away it's not an advertisement; it's not a corporate branding exercise. It's something different, and deeper."



© HUNTER SAXONY III, COLLECTION OF LETTERFORM ARCHIVE

***Nia Wilson / Say Her Name / No Silence* (2019), by Hunter Saxony III.**

Coles compares Saxony's work to that of the early-20th-century Dada movement or the Russian constructivists (who also favored a minimal palette of red and black): "They did something similar, using letters less to be read and more to be looked at and absorbed."

Despite how socially responsive his recent work can be, Saxony doesn't think of himself as an activist artist. "If you're making protest art, make the message super clear so people understand it," he says. "That's not what I'm doing. I'm trying to understand the world around me."

CLAIMING A MEDIUM

Born Terry Hunter Addison III, Saxony creates art under a pseudonym out of a long-standing fascination with noms de plume as "a way to create a new version of oneself, a way to escape and rediscover." When he moved to San Francisco from his native Rhode Island in 2003, he left behind his fresh-out-of-college data-entry job and decided he "wanted nothing to do with a life behind a computer." Instead, he got a cheap apartment in Haight-Ashbury and a retail job at Urban Outfitters to pay the bills, and he resolved to "spend as much time as I could in rare-book rooms."

He had been practicing calligraphy ever since getting his first set of primary color chisel-tip pens as a gift in elementary school. He plunged deeper into the antique craft of hand-lettering as a "pretty difficult" teenager, he says, after coming to the realization that his fascinations with graffiti, poetry, rap, and hardcore music all had one thing in common.

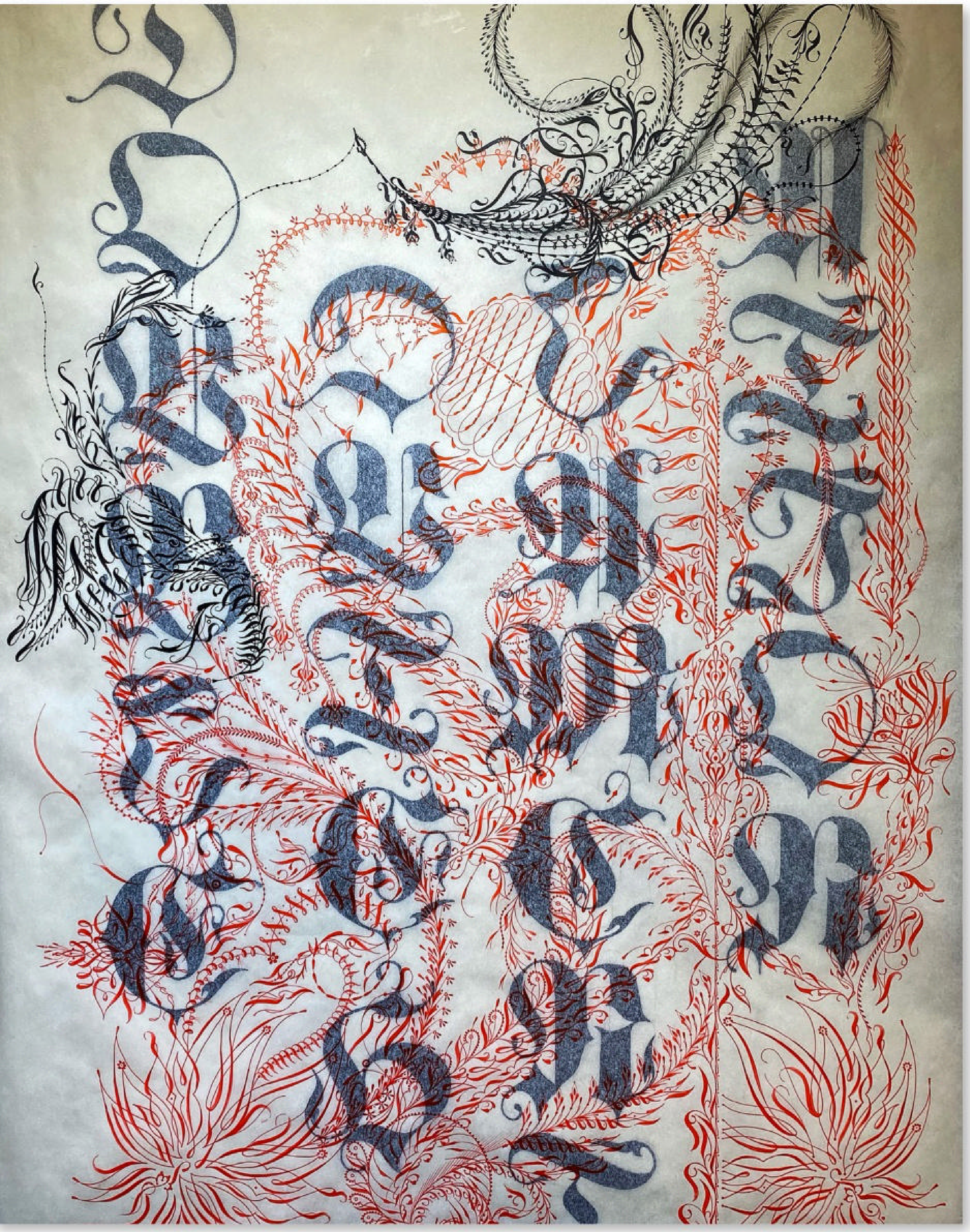
"For whatever reason, it was always about the lettering," Saxony says. "The words and the letters themselves resonated," whether in a spiky Gothic-lettered skateboard logo or on the album covers of the punk bands he followed, like Strife and Earth Crisis. "They used really powerful words for their band names, and I think that was the start of me trying to pair powerful words with my art. Even in art class, instead of making a picture, I wanted to make a skateboard-brand logo, because the letters were sick."

Saxony grew up in a family of educators (his father was an associate dean at Brown University; his grandfather was an education professor). As a student at Johnson

Hunter Saxony III at work in his San Francisco home studio. "More than eight hours can go by, isolated with my thoughts, with just this paper, in this room," he says.

& Wales University, he started spending time in the rare-book collection at the 200-year-old Providence Athenaeum library, tracing his love of script back to its root sources. He studied everything from medieval illuminated manuscripts to German and Italian copybooks, "pulling influence from anything that inspired," he says.

In San Francisco, Saxony sought out the volumes of valuable calligraphy in the collections of the city's antiquarian book dealers, such as those in the gallery-filled 49 Geary building, near Union Square. But he quickly discovered that those rarefied, hushed spaces weren't always welcoming to self-taught 21-year-old Black calligraphers who were there to learn, not acquire. "I was so nerdy. They didn't really like me because I was just there to look," Saxony says.



© HUNTER SAXONY III

Double Dutch Lamentation (for Breonna) **(2020), by Hunter Saxony III.**

So he bargained for time instead. "I'd ask, 'Hey, can I give you 30 bucks to pore through your books and take some photos?' And that became my thing. I'm not going to buy this $16,000 book, but if I could just get 45 minutes with it…" he says.

Saxony made the most of those precious brokered hours. Over the next two decades—including countless visits to rare-book rooms to study European classics and, more recently, Arabic and Asian lettering as well as Middle Eastern and North African ornament—he developed an increasingly recognizable personal style. Because he wasn't aware of an African American tradition in this form, "calligraphy felt totally open to me," he says. He could make the medium his own: exquisitely detailed, bright-red-and-black ink drawings, sometimes done on photographs, with large calligraphic letters and geometric shapes often hidden within the ornamentation.

"Using Gothic forms of lettering as a modality in which to address Black issues is pretty rare within the art world," Saxony said during a lecture at the San Francisco Public Library in November 2022. "In fact, from a historical standpoint, when I started working with letters, I didn't know any modern writing specialists that were Black."

FEELING THE WORDS

On a sunny winter morning in the small home studio of his second-floor Mission district flat, Saxony, who has long dreads, chunky glasses, and an infectious grin, chats enthusiastically about his evolving art practice. He also designs tattoos, in collaboration with his girlfriend, tattoo artist Megan Wilson. His recent pieces, many as large as posters, are taped to the walls and layered on the glass desk where he works for marathon stretches most days. "More than eight hours can go by, isolated with my thoughts, with just this paper, in this room," Saxony says.

His work is painstaking, undeniably beautiful, but also confounding. Words are often intentionally obscured, written along atypical, swirling or pinballing paths instead of left to right. The act of reading forces the viewer to slow down and search for meaning, in the process realizing that legibility itself might be optional.

In Saxony's *Perpetuate*, the title word is spelled out clockwise around the paper's perimeter. Letters trace the shape of an infinity symbol in *Incessant*. In his diptych *Bare Fragility*, the ornamental elements form a Greek omega and alpha. The meanings embedded in his chosen words might be cultural, sociopolitical, or entirely personal.

Saxony notes that he's even made work—such as his series *Between You and I*—"where only one other person knows what it says," creating a kind of secret language between artist and collector.

"The collector could share that meaning, or could keep it to themselves, and others would see it as just letters and ornamentation," he says. "I kinda like it that way. I'm playing with the idea of, How much information do you need to actually understand for the piece to be either beautiful or important?"

It's not surprising to learn that Saxony's favorite artists work primarily in ideas, rather than a specific medium, such as South African sculptor and installation artist Jane Alexander, public performance artist Pope.L, and Jenny Holzer "for the way she can make a personal dialogue a universal statement," he says.

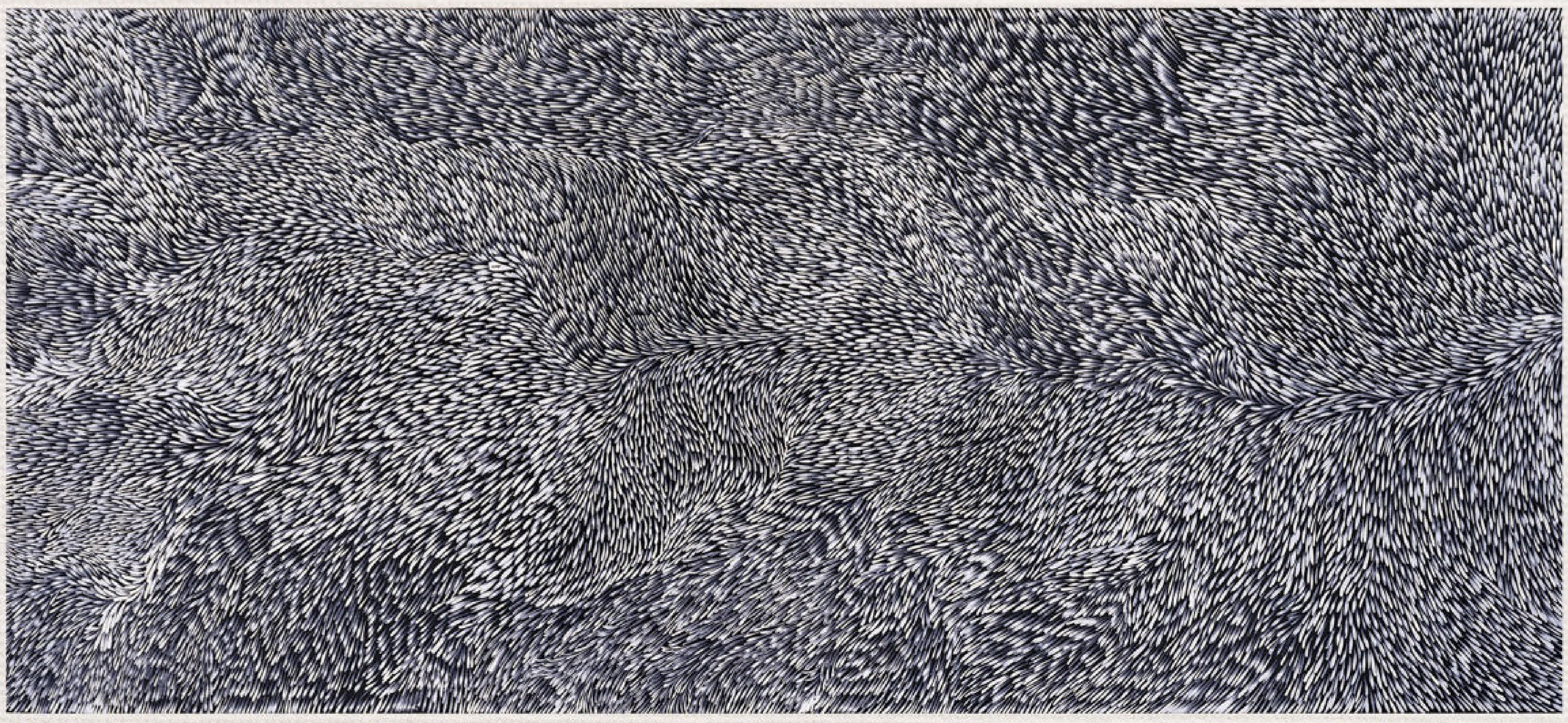
They're conceptual artists, like Saxony himself, whose work shares an element of provocation, a tendency to float ideas that aren't necessarily easy to apprehend.

"I'm always asking questions with my work, and I'm not necessarily saying that you need to know all the answers," Saxony says. "But I never want it to just be pretty words on the page. It's gotta be more than that. I've always wanted words to be felt." ■

Jessica Zack is a Bay Area journalist who frequently writes about art and artists. Her profile of photographer Matt Black in Alta Journal *17 was a finalist in the Los Angeles Press Club's 2022 National Arts & Entertainment Journalism Awards.*

WHY THIS ART

By PERRI LYNCH HOWARD



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Gloria Tamerre Petyarre's *Leaves*, a 13.1-foot-long Aboriginal Australian masterpiece, compels Perri Lynch Howard to consider the spiritual and environmental realities of a place when painting landscapes.

The Phenomenology of Place

I first laid eyes on *Leaves* when it was on view at the Seattle Art Museum in 2007. The dynamic patterning and implied motion within the lateral expanse of the painting were mesmerizing. It called to something deep within me to explore further, drawing me onward, like the horizon itself.

I was an emerging artist, and my life was in deep transition. I interpreted the title, *Leaves*, as the verb of departure, as in "she leaves." This painting was telling me that it was time to go wandering, to see, hear, and feel the world beyond my familiar surroundings, and to integrate place-based inquiry into my creative work.

But the painting, to the artist, Gloria Tamerre Petyarre, who died in 2021, was not about mobility but a visual description of leaves overhead, that rustle of shade that reduces the searing heat of Australia's Northern Territory to something tolerable. When the sun reclines, a shadowed space emerges below the tree canopy, and women gather there, swap stories, and sort seeds, processing the essential ingredients that feed their community.

When the Seattle Art Museum reopened after the COVID-19 lockdown, I masked up and revisited *Leaves*, which is now in the museum's permanent collection. It felt like being in the presence of an old friend, one who understands who you are and how you are, in a way beyond words. But so much had changed.

The painting evoked memories of the terrible 2019–2020 bushfires in Australia. I wondered whether Petyarre's leaves were still rustling overhead or had been scorched to the ground. Given the black-and-white palette, and the dire truths of climate change, I gazed at the painting and saw only ash.

Recently, I again visited *Leaves*, paying particular attention to how this work might inform my current body of paintings, Frequencies. This new series explores the passage of light, sound, and signal through environments suffering from rapid climate change—an investigation into the phenomenology of place.

I remain transfixed by *Leaves*, a monumental work informed by totemic geography, dreamtime, and ancestral wisdom rooted in the land. The piece is an important touchstone that I will return to again and again. I wonder where it will lead me next. ■

Perri Lynch Howard's work explores the relationship between human perception and sense of place through painting, sculpture, printmaking, and sound installations. She received a BA from the Evergreen State College, a BFA from the University of Washington, and an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art. Her studio work is represented by the Seattle Art Museum Gallery, and she has completed dozens of public art projects in the Pacific Northwest and across the globe, including in South India as a Fulbright scholar. She lives and works in Washington's Methow Valley.

By Meredith Lawrence • *Photo by* Erik Stenbakken

We're Western AF

A Wyoming YouTube channel is helping to drive the Americana music resurgence.

Mike Vanata walked out the back door of the Big Hollow Food Co-op in Laramie, Wyoming, looking for Canadian country musician Colter Wall.

Vanata and his friend Brian Harrington ran a fledgling YouTube channel where they posted videos of local musicians a few times a year. But the two friends were deadlocked over a name for their business—Vanata wanted to call it Western As Fuck, and Harrington insisted they couldn't have "fuck" in its name.

Behind the co-op, a brick-lined alleyway dotted with murals connected the store's parking lot to the back lot of the Cowboy Saloon and Dance Hall, where Wall was scheduled to perform that night. Acclaimed for his resonant baritone, Wall was a fast-rising star in the then-nascent Americana music revival. Asking him to shoot a video was a stretch. Vanata wanted to try anyway.

Harrington still isn't sure he believes what Vanata says happened next, but he accepts the story with the same blend of skepticism and affection he applies to all his partner's creative moon shots.

As Vanata recounts it, he exited the co-op's sliding back door, spotted Wall, and headed over to introduce himself. After a quick spiel about the YouTube channel, Vanata asked Wall if he'd make a video. Wall demurred.

With nothing to lose, Vanata took another shot, blurting out, "The channel's called Western As Fuck."

Wall softened instantly. "That's cool," he said. The bold name sealed the deal. And from then on, the channel would be called Western AF, abbreviated for official purposes.

A few days later, Vanata, Harrington, and their sound engineer Will Ross recorded Wall performing country music songster Eddy Arnold's "Cowpoke" in an empty airplane hangar outside Casper. In the black-and-white video, Wall stands alone at a microphone, guitar in hand.

Posted September 2, 2019, the video hit 10,000 views in 10 days and topped one million 112 days after its release. Today, it's been watched eight million times. Seemingly overnight, Western AF's follower numbers skyrocketed from a couple hundred to thousands.

Western AF now boasts 170,000 YouTube subscribers and 143,000 and 64,300 followers on Instagram and TikTok, respectively. Buoyed by the popularity of Americana artists like Brandi Carlile, Sturgill Simpson, and Tyler Childers, Western AF's intimate, single-song videos from singer-songwriters like Wall, Willi Carlisle, Sierra Ferrell, and Charley Crockett have racked up millions of views on the channel. Vanata and Harrington see themselves as documentarians capturing a new crop of country musicians who use intricate lyrics and traditional stylings to confront 21st-century culture.

"I'm conflicted on if music can really change the world.... But I do think it can have a huge impact on culture and affect a lot of aspects of our life," says Jonathan Een Newton, head of the independent label Free Dirt Records, which puts out Carlisle's music. "This kind of stuff just seems to be resonating with a lot of different types of people."

Wyoming is the country's least populous state or, as Vanata likes to say, "500,000 people and two escalators." Situated along the Union Pacific Railroad where it swings through southeastern Wyoming, Laramie snuggles between the Snowy Range Mountains and Laramie Range; the University of Wyoming rounds out the city's population at just shy of 32,000; and downtown's frontier-style brick facades evoke a western movie set.

Despite its name and bison logo, Western AF isn't a "western music" channel. Although Wyoming landscapes feed Harrington and Vanata's creativity and the state's DIY ethos liberates them to follow their own rules, they'll feature musicians from anywhere and often travel to shoot videos, too. For them, "western" is, as frequent collaborator Carlisle says, an attitude.

Western AF released a video for Carlisle's "Angels" shortly after Wall's "Cowpoke," and Carlisle partially credits it for his current popularity. "There's some [societal] sense that art lacks utility," he says. "So you struggle with a sense of whether or not your work is valuable, whether or not *you're* valuable." By gravitating to artists like Carlisle, Western AF is ascribing significance to their work, diversifying the available music, and building a community around the channel.

"The feeling that musicians get onstage has massive communal energy," Carlisle says. "Mike manages to bring that into the fucking editing room and behind the camera. And that, to me, that's his paintbrush."

Harrington and Vanata met on move-in day at Northwest College in Powell, Wyoming, when Vanata pretended to be a resident adviser by helping students move their boxes into the dorms—"the most harmless prank," Harrington calls it. Forming a fast friendship, they shared music tastes and occasionally shot videos together; eventually, they both settled in Laramie. The pair balance each other: Harrington executes Vanata's grand ideas, schedules appointments, keeps the books, perpetually tries to hide Vanata's cigarettes, and cajoles Vanata when he's feeling bad about a video; Vanata dreams big, is in Harrington's words "the genius," and lovingly thanks Harrington for keeping him in line by calling him "Dad"; when they fight, they buy each other gummy bears as consolation.

The music Western AF features defies genre terms. Many people call it Americana, a vague umbrella concept often applied to music by singer-songwriters whose work fans deem authentic. Others call it roots music, western music, folk, or country music. To Harrington, it's a pure form of the latter, though the term has been corrupted by pop country, from which he hopes to reclaim the genre. Whatever the name, the music on Western AF is popular enough that ad revenue from YouTube is a primary means of support for Harrington and Vanata.

Western AF seeks out songs with heart that feel real. Made-up or true, each conveys an emotional veracity that's relatable, delivered through detailed, skilled songwriting. When they capture an artist on video, Harrington and Vanata pick a shooting location that complements the song, aiming for an experience as intimate as if you were watching the musician play on their couch at home. The pair cemented this style, and its popularity, during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when, with music venues shuttered, Western AF offered a live-music substitute.

Musician Jade Brodie ascribes the channel's acclaim to an ability to convey something intangible. "Certain songs, it's like looking at a painting or looking at a photograph. You could talk about the light of a photograph till your face turns blue, but your soul is going to be drawn to it for God knows why," she says.

In December, in the airy office Western AF rents in a converted school building, Harrington and Vanata plan for a shoot later that afternoon with Denver-based musician Danno Simpson. On one side of the room, their desks sit end to end in front of a mosaic of photos

Mike Vanata, left, and Brian Harrington founded Western AF to promote Americana singers and songwriters.

from their lives, taped to the wall. They spin Johnny Paycheck's "Slide off of Your Satin Sheets," then a John Prine best-of album, followed by Charley Crockett's "Lonesome As a Shadow" on the record player. As often as not, Harrington and Vanata rib each other—"Bickering is our love language," Vanata tells me, repeatedly. Finally, they decide they'll shoot at the Cowboy Saloon and Dance Hall, where Vanata first met Colter Wall.

Hours before opening, the saloon is dark and vacant. A polished timber-plank bar stretches halfway down one side of the room, vintage bits and spurs and antlers dot the wood-panel walls, and behind the bar hangs a taxidermy hare clutching a beer can. Vanata and Harrington position Simpson on a narrow bench under a glass-block window that ethereally diffuses the afternoon light.

Setup is minimal: a microphone feeds into an audio recorder, one reflector on a stand bounces window light, and Harrington and Vanata each shoot with a handheld Sony camera. After a few jokes back and forth—Harrington makes fun of Vanata's headphones, and Vanata chides him not to move the mic—they're ready to film. "I think that some of the magic that comes is because shit's all over the place and then it all falls into place," Harrington says.

Simpson has chosen to perform "The Final Stand of Henry Lee." It's a song about an out-of-luck outlaw that Simpson wrote when he wanted to craft a murder ballad "without having another person get killed," he says.

Throughout the day, Vanata second-guessed his choices and fidgeted, but now, with a camera in hand, he's hyperfocused. Two takes in, he wants one more. He squeezes onto the bench facing Simpson for a tight shot, and Harrington crouches on the floor. Following Vanata's suggestion, Simpson delivers the song's climactic line—Lee's mother appears to him in a dream, begging him to put down his guns—into the camera. Vanata punches the air: "That was it! You're giving me chills, dude."

"He definitely has that magic eye that finds the visual emotion in the song," says Travis Blankenship, who manages Wall and several other artists who've appeared on Western AF.

Recently, Blankenship added Western AF to his artist roster, and last fall, the channel hosted its first in-person concert—a seven-artist showcase, featuring a mix of small and nationally known acts, that packed the Gryphon Theatre in Laramie. Harrington and Vanata are also planning to start producing vinyl pressings of their recordings.

"I think there's a lot more emotional and artistic value to Western AF than just a YouTube channel," says Benjamin Tod, the frontman for Lost Dog Street Band, who recorded one of the channel's most successful videos—of his song, "Wyoming." Harrington and Vanata have crafted themselves into a "cultural force," as Tod puts it. "There's no way to deny that Western AF is changing the shape of the music industry in general. Period." ■

An Oregon native, Meredith Lawrence lives in Brooklyn, New York, and writes about the West, climate change, and music. She won a long-form feature award from Folio for her article on cowboy poetry, "The Herd Word," in Alta Journal *10.*

A WESTERN AF VIDEO PLAYLIST

"TULSA'S LAST MAGICIAN," BY WILLI CARLISLE

Carlisle grew up in Kansas and Illinois and later moved to the Ozarks, where he became enamored of traditional folk music. He writes songs about queer love, capitalism, and the many characters he's met on the road.

"TRAVELING MAN," BY JADE BRODIE

Formerly a conductor with the Union Pacific Railroad, Brodie lives outside Winnemucca, Nevada, where she works on a ranch. She sings about her relationships and her work, including her position as a woman in traditionally male jobs.

"THE BALLAD OF THE CHOCTAW-APACHE," BY VINCENT NEIL EMERSON

Singer-songwriter Emerson hails from Van Zandt County in East Texas. His music draws from his experiences, including growing up poor with a single mother and the forced sale of his Choctaw-Apache grandmother's tribal land.

"OBSESSED WITH THE WEST," BY BRENNEN LEIGH

Leigh's performances include everything from '40s rhythm and blues to cowboy ballads to classic country songs. The Americana musician was raised in Minnesota and is based in Nashville.

—M.L.

PHOTOS BY WESTERN AF

POETRY

By THEA MATTHEWS

Thea Matthews was born and raised on Ohlone land, San Francisco. She holds an MFA in poetry from New York University, and her poetry has appeared in Southern Indiana Review, Interim, Tahoma Literary Review, *the* New Republic, *and other publications. Currently, Matthews lives on the land of the Lenape, Brooklyn, New York.*

With "Supernova," I confront our mortality and our fragility. Like stars, we're not physically indestructible; yet, we're incredibly resilient. The mind and body are extraordinary apparatuses for what ultimately cannot be broken. In the poem, I dive into corporeality with the last moments I got to have with someone I'd never met before who was suddenly in serious medical distress. I'm thankful I got to be one of the people present that night in San Francisco's Fillmore district. This person wasn't alone. We get to bear witness to one another and sometimes assist one another with transitions, of all kinds. ■

Supernova

I'm on McAllister and Fillmore on another Tuesday.
It's 8:30 p.m. and clocks have not fallen back yet
when a tote bag full of produce collapses. Apples,
pears, onions, and mangoes rush like a surge of flood
water to the curb. The bike is badly mangled
as a crumpled newspaper tossed to the back of a bus seat.
I stand motionless. "What happened?" a woman asks.
To my left, a concerned cluster of berries jaywalks
to the site of a supernova. I have never seen one
this close before. I walk closer to see her myself.
As the sidewalk begins to pant, wet asphalt spits
blood. The blood streams from the woman's mouth.
Shock travels through my eyes down to my feet.
An old fuchsia with silver curls has fallen.
I get on one knee, then caress her cheek
with my bare hand as if my soothing could extinguish
the fire below her skin as if I could dim
the vivid lights. I bow in reverence. I am powerless.
The final count of her breath is seen light-years away.
With each exhale, I whisper,
                                        You're okay.
                              You're okay.
                    You're okay.
I watch her lips gasp for whatever's left,
for whatever stardust is left that makes us sentient.
Fish feel pain too. Her jacket is a crimson pond.
With my voice crackling in the fire, I breathe into her,
                    You're gonna be alright.

I heard somewhere
death is painless compared to birth.

PHOTO BY GETTY IMAGES

FICTION

By RACHEL HOWZELL HALL • *Illustrations by* VICTOR JUHASZ

Breakdown in the Right Lane

Friday, January 13
Around 4:30 p.m.
Near the Sepulveda airport tunnel, Los Angeles

C*AMRON PICKED HER UP FROM THE AIRPORT*—that's how I knew he was in love. Camron didn't pick Sienna Rogers up from easier airports in Burbank or Long Beach. No, sir. Camron picked her up from LAX, the third gluttonous circle of hell with its millions of cars and buses and travelers pulling suitcases and creeping farther out from the sidewalks and into the street to flag down their rides.

"Your turn, babe," Camron says now.

I glance at him, sitting behind the wheel of my BMW and texting on his phone. Last year this time, the car's cabin used to smell of his sweet, citrus-scented cologne. But he no longer wears cologne because *she's* allergic.

"OK, let's see," I say, closing my eyes to think. "Oh! Got one. It's illegal to curse in front of a dead person in Texas."

Camron snorts. "You're kidding me."

"So don't ever give a eulogy and say, 'This bitch kicked the fuckin' bucket, y'all.'" I laugh. "Your turn."

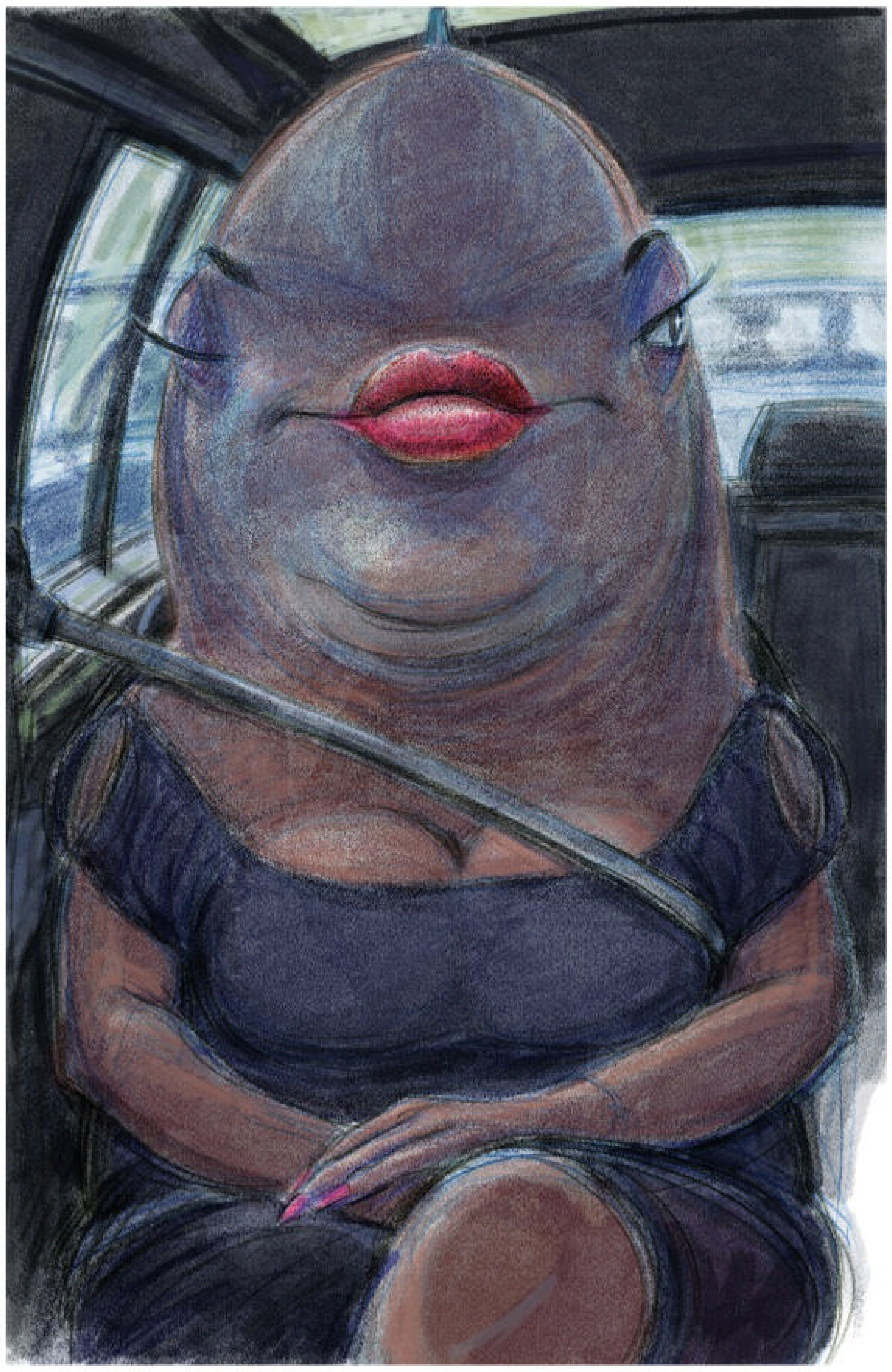
He squints out at the traffic surrounding us. "The western lowland gorilla's scientific name is *Gorilla gorilla gorilla*."

I cackle. "Cuz its genus and species names—"

"—are the same," we say together.

The phone in my purse vibrates, but I don't pull it out. Not yet. I keep thinking about all those things he does for *her*. That makes me shake, makes me pant, makes my pulse a pinball, zigzagging from my toes to my ears to my front teeth.

Camron doesn't hear my breathing—he's texting on his phone and singing along to Champaign's "How 'Bout Us" now playing on the radio. Even though we're headed to a romantic sunset picnic at the beach, we are no longer made for each other. Even though his hand is on my knee, we will never love each other for life.



How 'bout us?

There is no "us," not anymore.

I'm a fact-checker for an encyclopedia publisher, so I know this is true.

Six months ago, I sat in my backyard at the firepit. A shaker of Paper Planes rested between my feet as I held a cocktail glass in one hand and my phone in the other. After logging into the MY BMW app, I sipped my bourbon cocktail and watched the icon of my Bimmer circle the airport three times until it finally stopped at Terminal 5. I refilled my glass and swiped over to the app connected to the hidden camera in the Bimmer's upper console that holds the garage opener.

Camron, his face as bright as all the lights of Los Angeles, hopped out of the car to help Sienna Rogers load her suitcase into the trunk. Then she slipped into the front seat, her black hair like satin ribbons and shinier than her chestnut eyes, looking just like that actress, what's-her-face, in that movie.

Camron (if Lenny Kravitz made video games instead of music) held Sienna's face in his hands and said, "I missed you like Sonny missed Cher."

Sienna, the chief baker and founder of SiennaSweet, held up a bag of cookies. "I brought you some Johnny Cakes, your second-favorite sweet treat! Cuz *I'm* the first and best-tasting sweet treat in your life." She waited a beat, then asked, "Where's the lush?"

"Home. Drunk, as usual." Then he said, "Next trip you take, it's me, you, and Cancun."

That night, I ignored the sky, a bruise of reds and purples. Breathless, I toggled between the icon and the hidden camera, watching my car inch out of the airport, watching the happy couple make out every time the car stopped. Every time they kissed, I took a long sip of my Paper Plane cocktail. The icon finally merged onto North Sepulveda Boulevard—that was seven sips for seven kisses at seven stops—and then it stopped again at In-N-Out, another circle of hell but with burgers at the end. After Camron and Sienna's marathon make-out session during their wait for food, my cocktail shaker clattered onto its side, empty as a result of my pitiful drinking game.

Camron came home that night around midnight. His glasses were smudged, and his "Mordor Fun Run" T-shirt stank of grilled onions and musty-sweet cherry blossom body lotion.

If his Porsche hadn't been repossessed—and if I hadn't been charged with a DUI and couldn't drive for six months—I would've never caught him cheating on me in real time.

And now look at us.

I sink deeper into my BMW's passenger seat. "You good?" I ask Camron.

He says, "Uh-huh," then winks at me and squeezes my knee. The dragon tattooed between his thumb and index finger flexes its wings.

I hold his tatted hand to my face. "Slippery dick is a fish found in the Atlantic Ocean."

A small muscle flexes around his right temple. Involuntary revulsion—my touch or the fish with the strange name?

Camron's hands are smoother than mine. Game design is not coal mining. Game design is not emergency-room trauma work, either. Camron's one callus, on his right middle finger, developed from years of holding a digital pen. He doesn't feel pain in that spot, and he's poked it with safety pins and he's held a burning match to it. "I don't feel a thing," he's boasted.

I told my younger sister, Aliyah, about the calluses that I, too, have developed over my 20-year marriage. There are calluses over my nerves. There's a callus over my tongue. There's one covering my heart, but my heart still feels pain in places that calluses can't reach.

"Lotta traffic," Camron says now. He winks at me. "Bet you don't miss driving in *this*."

Ruby-red brake lights from the millions of cars around us flash and burn. LAX, with its landmark Googie Theme Building, looms to our right. A Lufthansa jumbo jet roars over us, so close that I can reach up and run my fingers along its sleek, riveted belly.

"Maybe we should've taken the freeway," Camron says.

"Turned-over truck on the 405," I say. "Accident on the 110. Believe it or not, I *do* miss driving, even in stupid traffic." I pause, then add, "Don't worry. We'll get there."

Camron says, "Yeah," but frowns and throws a peek at the clock: four thirty-five.

I tug his ear. "Stop stressing out," I say, my mouth tasting muddy. "We'll still catch the sunset—that's at five-oh-five. And we'll eat our fancy salami and cheese, and we'll hike down to the tide pools like we used to do. The sea urchins ain't going nowhere, ha."

He says, "Ha," then glares out the windshield.

"Your turn," I say.

"Umm… A blue whale tongue…" He squints past the windshield and whispers, "Shit."

We will soon enter the six-lane tunnel that runs beneath two airport runways. A little over 1,900 feet long, this tunnel is filled with thousands of cars each day—and most of them are now caught in traffic with us. Brake- and headlights reflect and slide off the tunnel's tiled walls.

I snort. "Cam, why are you acting brand-new? You know there's traffic on Fridays. Hey, we can reschedule if you want. Try again next week? I'll be off suspension and I'll be able to drive again."

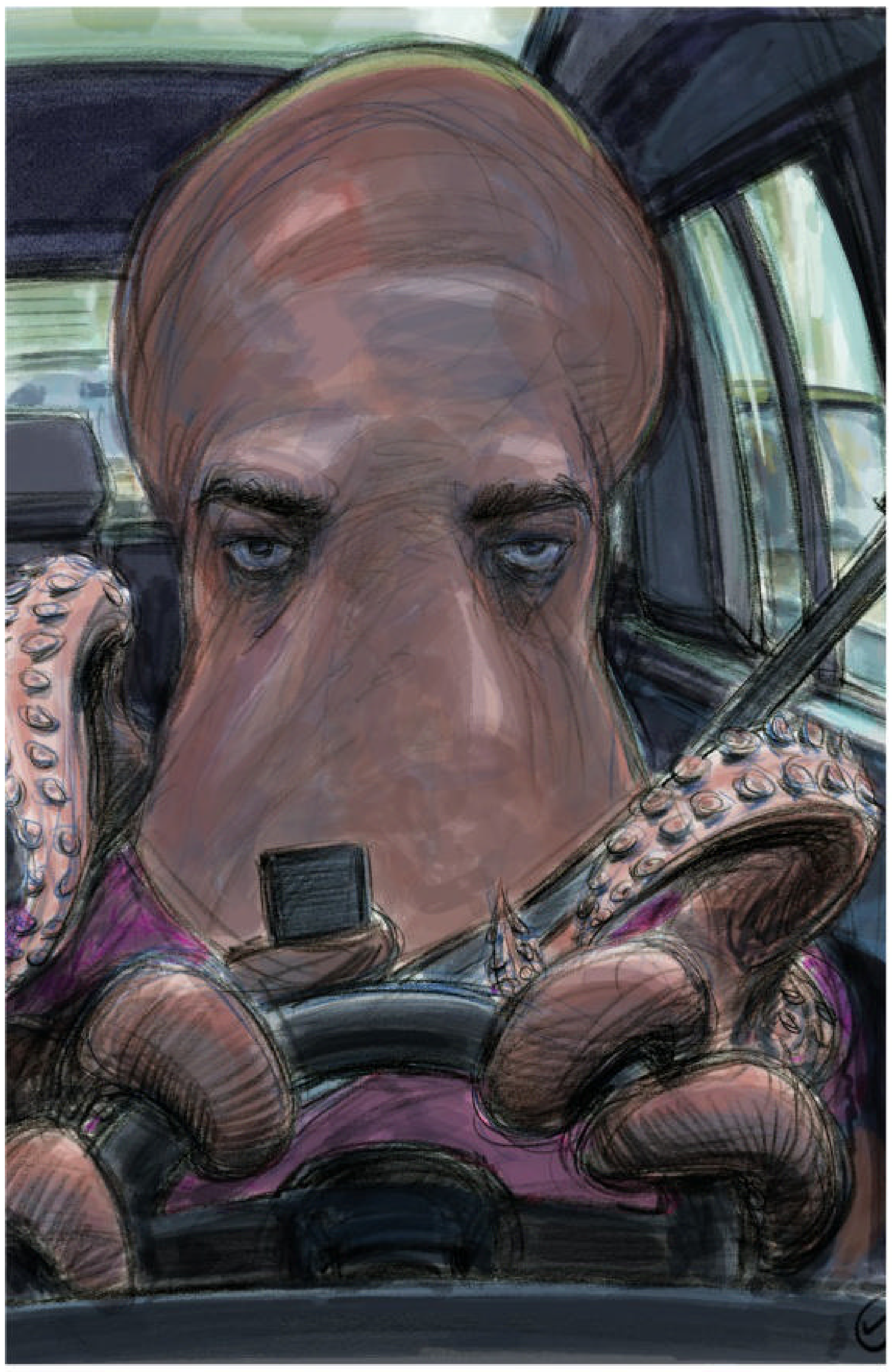
"It's all good," he says.

"All good," I agree even as bile burns my throat. "A blue whale tongue… *What?*"

"It weighs as much as an elephant," he says.

I say, "Ouch," then laugh and cross my legs. "Pass."

Camron and I met our freshman year at the arcade in Westwood Village near UCLA. He was a math major. I was majoring in history. I beat him at *Galaga*, and as a reward he bought me a cup of Penguin's frozen yogurt. He had kind almond-brown eyes, braces, and a lopsided Afro. Although he had no swag, he didn't blink as I dumped two dollars' worth of graham crackers on my strawberry fro-yo. He didn't judge me after I told him that the TV in my dorm room came courtesy of my Uncle Mac, who'd looted Circuit City during the riots just weeks before. We came up with a game: Outgoof Me. We'd pepper each other with goofy facts. His first: penicillin was originally named "mold juice." My first: a cloud can weigh more than a million pounds.



"He's such a big-ass geek," my sister Aliyah said, her lip curled. "You are, too. But you're cute. Fix his outside, and you may have something."

A good Black barber. Lasik surgery. Personal trainer.

It took a moment, but Camron is now King Geek, the kind of geek women love. The kind who owned a Porsche (repossessed) and a cabin in Big Bear (sold). We will soon lose our house. Sienna doesn't know it yet, but she will lose the second bakery storefront he purchased for her as "an investor." The King is broke.

Today, Camron wouldn't buy me a frozen yogurt if I asked. Once, he pointed to my thighs and my growing double chin and said, "Goofy fact: fear of an empty glass is called cenosillicaphobia. Maybe that's what you have. And the glasses are martini and highball."

Yeah, I've changed, too. My wide smile is now tight and weary. My boobs have become a bosom. My calves have become cows and are as hairy as a yeti's. And according to Camron, I have a fear of empty cocktail glasses.

We can't blame kids—we don't have any, not that we haven't tried.

We can't blame pets—Norm, our chocolate Lab, died two weeks ago from cancer.

We can blame…money, success, the hustle, too many rib eyes, too much bourbon. We can blame social media, well-placed calluses, skipping Zumba, a baker named Sienna who first met my husband the day she pitched him a baking video game app titled *Cupcake Chaos!*

Right now, a bag of Sienna's baked goods—toffee brittle cookies—sits in my car's middle console, and a chilled bottled water sits in the cup holder.

Fact: Sienna's cookies are the bomb.

Fact: Sienna's cookies will make you wanna slap yo mama.

Fact: Sienna's cookies are to *die* for.

Inescapable fact: Sienna's cookies provoke violence.

A white Lexus in the left lane tries to wedge into the right lane and in front of my car.

"To go *where*?" I ask, incredulous. "We're *stopped*."

"Nope." Camron closes the gap between my Bimmer's front bumper and the rear bumper of the Toyota Corolla in front of us.

The bitch in the Lexus sees Camron's commitment to block her and decides to wait and wedge between our rear bumper and the old Benz behind us.

I laugh—at least we're still compatible in *this*.

Camron winks at me. "We'll get there. You know me: I never give up. And we're celebrating, right? Your suspension ends tomorrow. Date night for the win." He leans over and kisses me. "Truth: Anaya Frost still rocks my boat."

"Truth," I say. "Camron Frost is the most beautiful man in the world."

"I call bullshit," he says, eyebrow cocked.

"Siri," I say, "is it true—?"

Camron kisses me before I can complete my query. I place my hand on his cheek, lean closer to him, and hold up my phone. "Smile."

He smiles.

I smile.

Click.

Such a happy couple—the picture says so.

A year ago, I flew back from Chicago after my publisher's annual retreat. After landing at LAX, I grabbed my luggage from baggage carousel three and hustled out to United's pickup area. There, I waited for Camron to arrive…and I kept waiting…

Airplane engines rumbled over me. The noise of people and cars and squeaky hydraulics of bus doors and the hot and humid air and the waiting and anxiety… I started to cry.

With trembling hands, I checked the text messages I'd sent earlier to Camron.

About to board honey
Awesome babe
Plane lands at 6:37 pm
Sorry I know that time sucks
No prob
I'll be there

I called Camron. "Where are you? Are you close?"

Camron said, "Huh? Shit. You're flying home *tonight*? I'm in the Valley for a meeting."

I caught a taxi home that night, and my heart teetered on the edge of something… *final*. I liked the quiet of the cab, the lack of conversation between me and the driver. Hasan, the cabbie, didn't complain as we waited in the drive-through lane at In-N-Out. For his patience, I gifted him a Double-Double and a Neapolitan shake.

Since then, Camron has stopped picking me up from the airport.

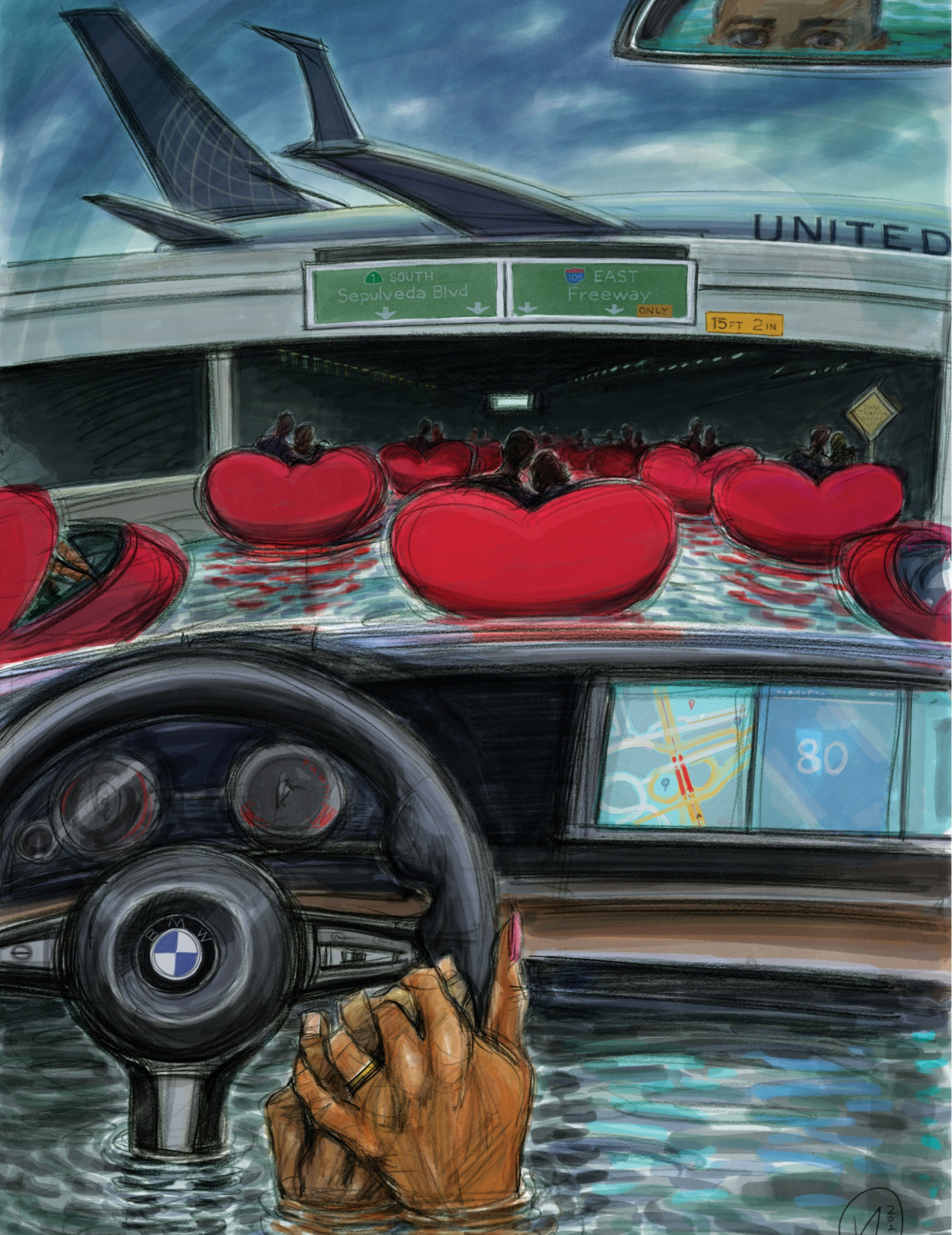
Since then, he no longer checks to see if my food orders are correct.

Oh, no, they put mayo on your burger? I specifically said no mayo.

Oh, no, they put guacamole in your burrito? I specifically said no guac.

Oh, no, they forgot to put your fries/biscuit/wings in the bag?

Fuck Anaya and her plain-ass, dry-ass food—he said that once to someone on the phone. Probably Sienna.


UNITED
1 SOUTH
Sepulveda Blvd
105 EAST
Freeway
ONLY
15FT 2IN
BMW
80

I no longer rushed home, and I took freeways every chance I got.

The 405 for people-watching.

The 10 for the sunset.

The 90 to go nowhere fast.

Why reach an unhappy home and fucked-up food in 35 minutes when I could reach an unhappy home and starve in an hour ten?

Camron and I never meet for lunch anymore, either.

“So much traffic,” he’ll claim. “All that subway construction.”

“They closed two lanes,” he’ll say. “Crazy traffic.”

Once, I joined in. “Police car chase—traffic was bonkers.” A lie even though police *were* probably chasing someone somewhere.

Goofy fun fact: In the City of Angels, there are 650 miles of freeway and 22,000 miles of surface streets. Sad that not one of them will ever bring us together again.

Camron and I are now officially late to our romantic picnic dinner in Rancho Palos Verdes. We were supposed to sit on the bluffs that look out at the Pacific Ocean and watch a beautiful sunset, with the last rays of light ricocheting off the endless blue sea. But we’re still 16 miles away.

We creep into the tunnel.

My stomach burns.

“We’re never gonna get there,” Camron says, rubbing his face.

“Well…” I pull up Google Maps on my phone and show him the thick red line that is our route to RPV. “We can turn around—”

“Turn around *where*?” Camron shouts. “We’re in the tunnel now, Anaya. We *can’t* turn around or get off. We’re fucking stuck.” He hits the steering wheel, pushes the horn, and growls.

With numb fingers, I touch his arm. “It’s OK, Cam. You tried.” I smile. “Fun, goofy fact: dolphins sleep with one eye open.”

He pushes out a breath. “Really?”

“To come up for air,” I say. “And then to watch out for predators. Basically, one half of their brain rests while the other keeps them swimming.”

He says, “Ha, that’s crazy,” then glares at the clock again.

I crack open the bottled water. “It *is* crazy. My Myers-Briggs personality is a dolphin.” Kindness, peace, a distaste for unpleasant situations.

Camron gulps half the bottle.

“Wanna know what your personality animal is?” I ask. “An octopus. Smart, quick thinking, innovative. Panicky when dealing with unexpected details and loses track of specifics.”

Camron chuckles. “Sounds about right.”

I grab the old iPhone from my bag and swipe over to MESSAGES.

Do I take your breath away?
Do you want my hot tight body?

I read these text messages to myself to remember—*keep one eye open*. Remembering will keep me alive.

“Another interesting fact.” I clear my throat, then say, “Your lungs are the only organ that can float on water. Incredible, right?”

“Incredible.”

We will make great parents
We’ll hire a nanny so that I can have you to myself
I will give you what she can’t

“Nannies used to be called nurses,” I say. “And they were sometimes required to breastfeed. Hence, the term *wet nurse*.”

Camron’s bronze face is slick with sweat. His nervous fingers fumble at the bag of cookies, and he pulls one from the bag and takes a big bite.

A nervous eater, Camron turns to food anytime he’s stressed out. Climbing the ladder to become creative director at M80 Games means he eats almost all the time. Unlike me, he loses that weight in two workouts. I gain three pounds on a diet of air and Tic Tacs.

We’re now almost to the middle of the tunnel.

The cause of traffic: a stopped Subaru with a crumpled hood and a Prius with its airbag activated. The cars’ hazard lights blink-blink-blink and glow in the subway tile.

We’re not going anywhere—and a tow truck won’t be able to plow through, either.

We’re trapped.

Camron’s invitation to this date night was as random as an orangutan holding a flashlight. He said that he missed me. He said that he wanted us to reconnect. He said that COVID-19 had taught him to carpe diem and to love me the way that I deserved to be loved, that he’d neglected me, and as a result I’d become an alcoholic. One DUI—and I didn’t even know how *that* had happened—and to him I’d become a drunk-ass lush who needed his love.

That day, our texts planning our date night flew back and forth. I ordered charcuterie from Lady and Larder. He planned to pick up a bottle of fancy red wine—what’s $200 when you’re celebrating a much-needed reconciliation—as well as dessert. Light fell golden through our living room windows. The taped-up moving boxes near the breakfast bar glimmered like treasure chests. The world had filled with magic again.

But then other texts started flying back and forth on the old iPhone he’d forgotten to deactivate on his last upgrade—and that phone vibrated from my back pocket. Sienna and Camron were texting again.

Sienna I’ve always dreamed of you
You are my real life Tinkerbell
I am under your spell
Cammy I can’t stop crying every time you leave me
Soon Tink these things don’t happen overnight
Just get her drunk again
Sneak some vodka in her sparkly water
Like last time
Make her drive somewhere
I’ll call it in again
Jail this time
Ha ha Bye bitch!!
Or
Do what we talked about
Remember I know some people ●

A vise locked tight around my chest. *What?*

On the night of my DUI, Camron and I met at a party for friends. I’d sipped one vodka tonic and had Camron bring me sparkling water with lime for the rest of the night. Two hours later, I got behind the wheel of my car to drive home. It didn’t take long for a patrol cop to pull me over—a call had come in about a swerving black BMW with my license plate. I said, “Huh?” then blew into the Breathalyzer—I’d drank the equivalent of four vodka tonics. I swore to the cop that I’d had *one drink* two hours ago. The Breathalyzer knew better than that.

But I didn’t.

Those text messages kneecapped me, and I sank to the kitchen floor in tears. Then I took an Uber since Camron was now using my car. Jabari, the Uber driver, carried me 17 miles, past coffee shops and BBQ joints and weed depots and mariscos and falafel and kitfo spots, to reach Tommy’s way up on Beverly. There, I consoled myself with a chili burger and a tray of chili cheese fries.

Three cops ate at a tall standing counter, white napkins draped over their blue wool shirts.

I wanted to show them the text messages and scream, “See what he’s trying to do?”

But I let the boys in blue eat, and I gobbled my chili-covered crap in silence as the forgotten phone’s screen filled with love texts between my husband and the baker.

Stuck in traffic, I continue to read those love texts between Camron and Sienna.

I want her gone
Dead
D-E-A-D
Cammy, Niko got the money
Just needs a place to swim to
Working on it

“Eye-opening fact,” I say. “On average, a drunk driver drives 80 times before getting arrested the first time.” I shrug. “Guess I’ve always been the exception. One and done for me.”

Camron gobbles two more cookies, then guzzles the rest of the water.

I cock an eyebrow. “You really like those cookies, don’t you? Unless you’re nervous.”

“Why would I be nervous?” He swipes crumbs from his T-shirt. “And the cookies taste a little stale. Recipe’s different.”

“They’re from Sienna’s shop.” My pulse bangs in my ears—I can barely hear myself speak.

“I know—I’m the one who ordered them.”

I snort. “You didn’t order *this* batch.”

“Johnny Cakes—they were delivered this afternoon.”

“And I replaced them with Bangin’ Brittles.” I pause, then add, “I didn’t actually go *into* her bakery—I’m not *that* stupid. They should be stale—they’re about a month old. I saved them from Aliyah’s baby shower, froze them, then reheated them before you got home today.”

“But…Bangin’ Brittles have *peanuts*.” He squints at me with bloodshot eyes. “I’m *allergic* to peanuts.”

“Fact.”

> No she can’t swim so not the third cave
> *Cammy two oxy tanks for Niko’s dive will cost extra*

“Sixty-four percent of Black Americans can’t swim,” I say. “Me included.”

Camron’s knuckles whiten as he clenches the steering wheel. “Anaya, are you for real? You just let me eat…?”

“Cookies with peanut-filled toffee bits?” And now, I read the text messages aloud:

> Bluffs near RPV Sacred Cove
> We’ll be there for sunset
> There’s wine
> Good wine so she’ll be drunk too

Pink welts slash Camron’s cheeks. “Anaya, babe. Let me explain. Wait—” He points at the iPhone in my hand. “That’s mine.”

I say, “Fact,” then read:

> *High tide is 7:54 pm*

“I was gonna call it off,” Camron says, his eyes flaring with fear and forced cheer.

I say, “Fake news,” and read:

> Glug-glug pop-pop glug-glug lol

“You sent ‘pop-pop glug-glug’… Wow. Just 20 minutes ago. I was riding with *you* in this *car* 20 minutes ago.”

Camron reaches over to open the glove compartment. He pushes out the car registration, the owner’s manual, service invoices…

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” I ask.

“My EpiPen—where is it?” His tongue sounds like it’s made of cold, unshaped clay.

“Oh, no. It’s not in there?” I ask, eyebrow high.

Camron’s wet eyes shrink into his swelling face. He holds his throat with puffy fingers.

“Did you know,” I say, “that without proper treatment, you can die from anaphylaxis in less than 15 minutes?” I tilt my head and squint at him. “Did you know that the little greeting card that Sienna sent today with your original cookie order said, ‘Till death do us part’? Ha ha.”

I sigh. “I’ve stuck by you for over 20 years. Paid all the bills every time you got laid off. Didn’t blink anytime you spent our money on bullshit. Cars, houses that were way too big and stupid for just two people. Here’s a fun fact: I’m a dumbass who refused to accept the fact that her husband was a selfish octopus with tentacles aimed at her neck.”

“Nya.” Camron reaches for me, then takes a deep breath. He sounds like a squeaking mouse. “I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I love you so much.” His tatted hand lands on my knee. The vein in the middle of his forehead hardens.

Tears fill my eyes as I take his hand and drape it across the chest he’s so proud of. “Sad fact,” I say. “I didn’t see us ending like this, Camron.” I tap EMERGENCY on the passcode screen, then tap 9-1-1 and CALL.

There’s a click and then: “Nine-one-one. This is Shawna. How can I help you?”

My freak-out starts in my gut and rolls like a dust storm up my throat. “My husband,” I cry. “He’s having an allergic reaction.”

“Where are you?” Shawna the dispatcher asks. “What is your location?”

A sob breaks from my throat and keeps me from telling her…

That I’m located where the roars of planes and the echoes of thundering car engines block all thought. That I’m located in a place with air that stinks of jet and car exhaust. There is no sky here. There is no quiet here. There is no easy way in.

In Los Angeles, the average emergency-response time is seven minutes.

A ponytailed mom runs from her battered minivan back to our car. She jams an EpiPen into Camron’s thigh.

Camron doesn’t wince from the needle jabbing past his jeans and into his thigh muscle. His glossy eyes shine but have no life. His mouth hangs open, but there is no breath.

Funny how traffic changes people.

Between January and June last year, there were nearly 460 road rage incidents in L.A.

A minister on his way to a prayer meeting can turn into a foul-mouthed merchant marine.

A soccer mom driving her kids to practice can transform into a soccer hooligan.

A fact-checker for the only printed encyclopedia published today can become a brokenhearted road rager in the Sepulveda airport tunnel.

After EMTs pronounce Camron’s time of death, a police officer with bright gray eyes escorts me to the back seat of his police sedan.

Weary from mania and distress, I shiver uncontrollably, like I’m stuck in the Arctic Circle wearing only these cargo pants and this fleece sweatshirt. I read the last text messages that Sienna and Camron sent before we drove into the tunnel.

> I’m not doing this just for insurance
> She is a reminder of my failures
> *New years resolution #1 done 13 days into 2023!!!*
> *Lose 154 lbs!!!*

“Mrs. Frost?” The officer meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. “Sorry about your loss.”

I’m sorry, too. But a dolphin’s gotta do what a dolphin’s gotta do to swim another day.

“If there wasn’t so much traffic,” the cop is saying, “EMTs would’ve reached him sooner. A *cookie*?”

“We used to keep an EpiPen in the car, but…” I take a deep breath, then exhale.

Up ahead, I see long-term airport parking lots, supermarkets and coffee shops, streetlamps and the purple nighttime sky. Up ahead, I see life.

The patrol car races out of the Sepulveda airport tunnel, heading north toward my soon-to-be foreclosed home on the bluffs of Westchester. “Hungry?” the cop asks.

A teardrop tumbles down my cheek. “Starving.”

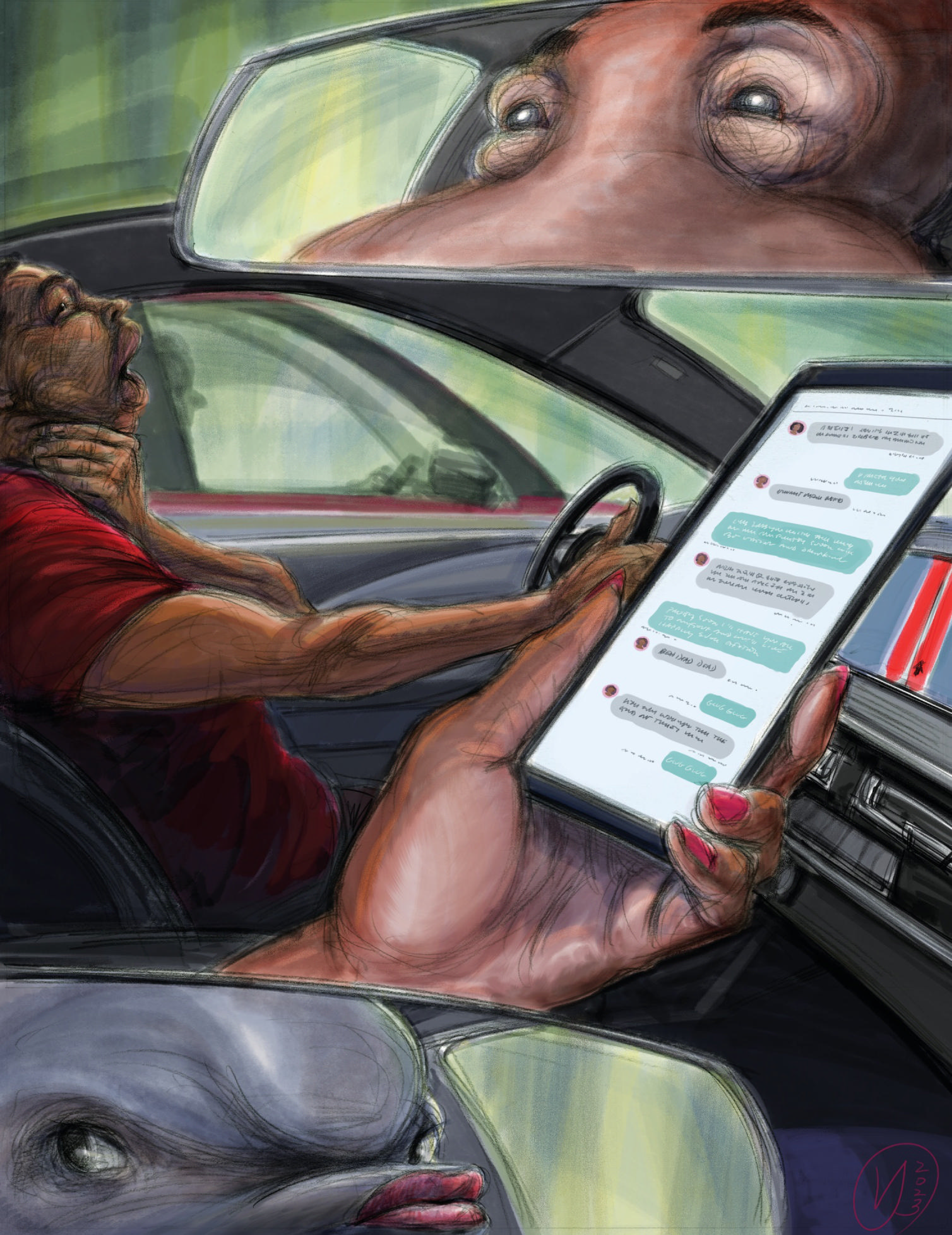
“There’s Del Taco, Chik-fil-A…” He nods to his left. “In-N-Out.”

The scent of fried hamburgers and grilled onions wafts into the patrol car. My stomach growls, desire tickling my taste buds. “In-N-Out?”

He nods. “Wouldn’t be a trip from LAX without a burger, right?” He meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. “What do you want on it? Plain? Without onions? Cheese?”

I try to smile. “Thanks for asking. A Double-Double, animal-style.” I pause, then cock my head. “Wanna hear a fun fact about burger culture in Los Angeles?” ■

Rachel Howzell Hall is the author of 11 novels, including the bestselling thrillers We Lie Here *and multiple award-nominated* These Toxic Things *and* And Now She’s Gone. *A Los Angeles native, she is a former member of the board of directors for Mystery Writers of America and was a featured writer on NPR’s acclaimed* Crime in the City *series and the National Endowment for the Arts weekly podcast.*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2023

PHOTO BY PENNI GLADSTONE

ART OF ACCESS

Designing Without Compromise

What does a 5,000-unit public housing complex in the Bronx, New York, share with the suburbs of San Antonio, Texas? While growing up in both, Erick Mikiten received the same message: "You're not welcome here." That's because as soon as Mikiten, now 59, began walking, he started breaking bones—a result of osteogenesis imperfecta. Neither of the buildings he lived in was wheelchair accessible.

Often laid up in a traction bed and stuck in a single room in his Texas home, Mikiten spent his childhood sketching his house from memory. "It wasn't until years later that I realized I was drawing floor plans," he says. An architecture job in high school led to the master's program at UC Berkeley. He founded his firm, Mikiten Architecture, with his wife in 1991.

The same year, the Americans with Disabilities Act standards took effect, which Mikiten calls a "compromise": "I saw people with disabilities advocating for shallower ramps and larger bathrooms that did not get incorporated in the ADA." The legislation prompted unattractive choices, like ramps tacked onto buildings as afterthoughts.

Mikiten doesn't compromise. He considers accessibility, sustainability, and artistry from day one of every project. "If we design things the right way in the beginning, we're saving future costs and material resources," he says. A project like Mikiten's 39-unit affordable housing complex in Alameda, California, exemplifies the stunning possibilities of accessibility—the interiors flow seamlessly into the decks and the compacted-gravel yard, all perfectly level for wheelchair-riding inhabitants.

Mikiten's new initiative, the Art of Access, extends the reach of his five-person firm to projects with other architects from Boston to Tokyo. He advocates for beautiful, accessible design locally through his 2012 appointment to the California Building Standards Commission. People with disabilities have a "lived experience that could help every designer," he says, "if only we are asked." ■

—JESSICA KLEIN

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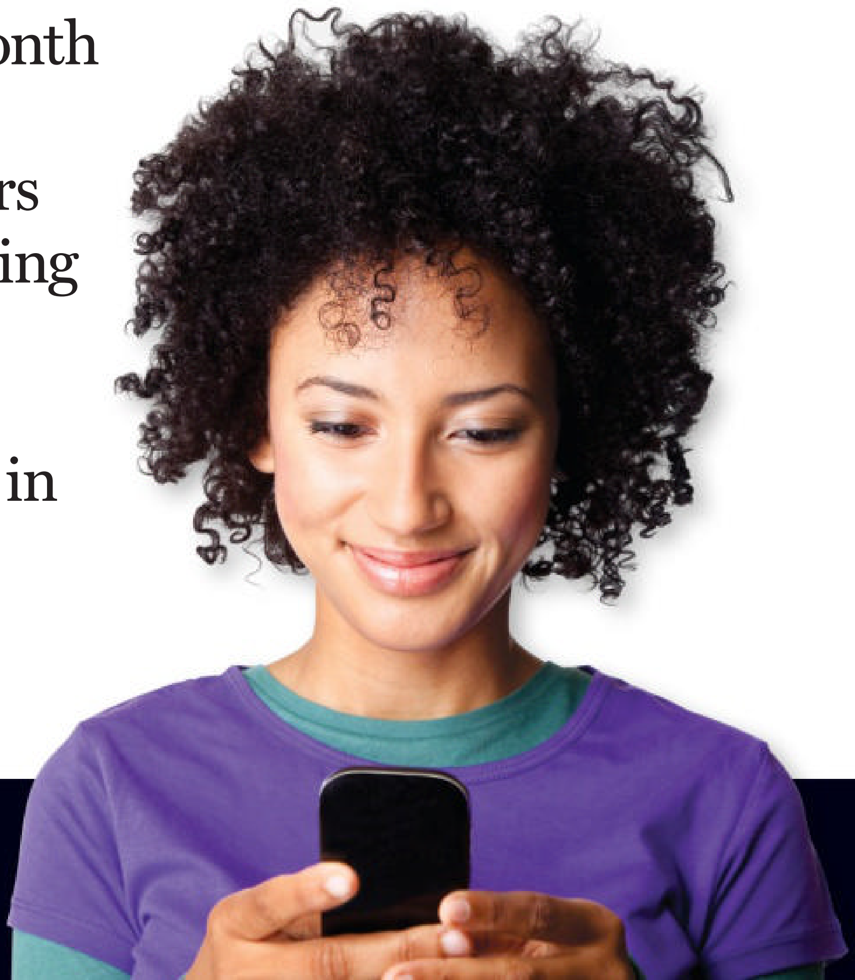

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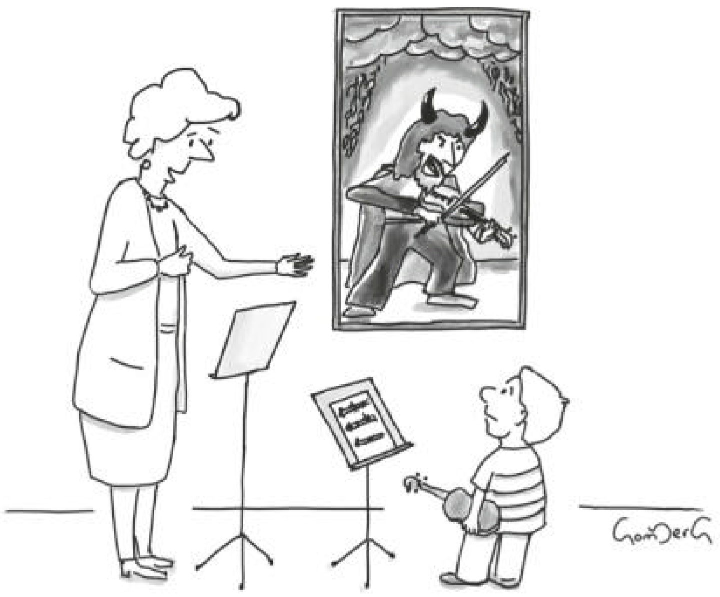
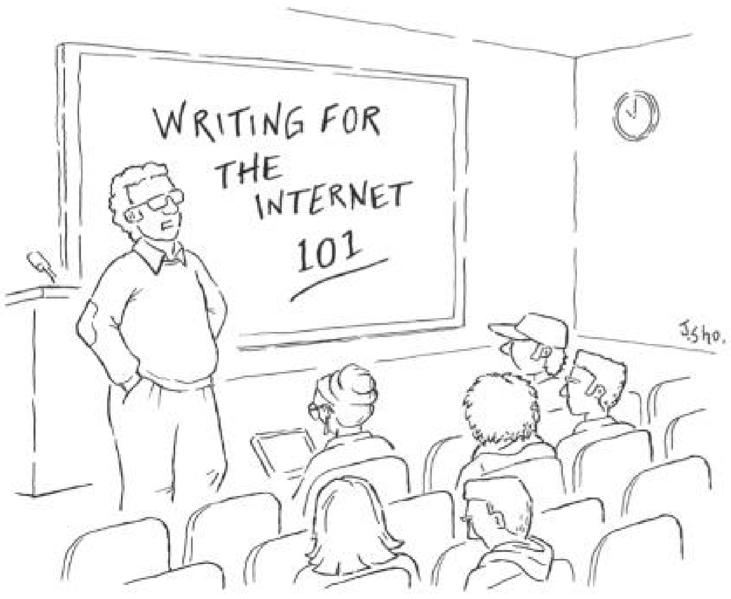


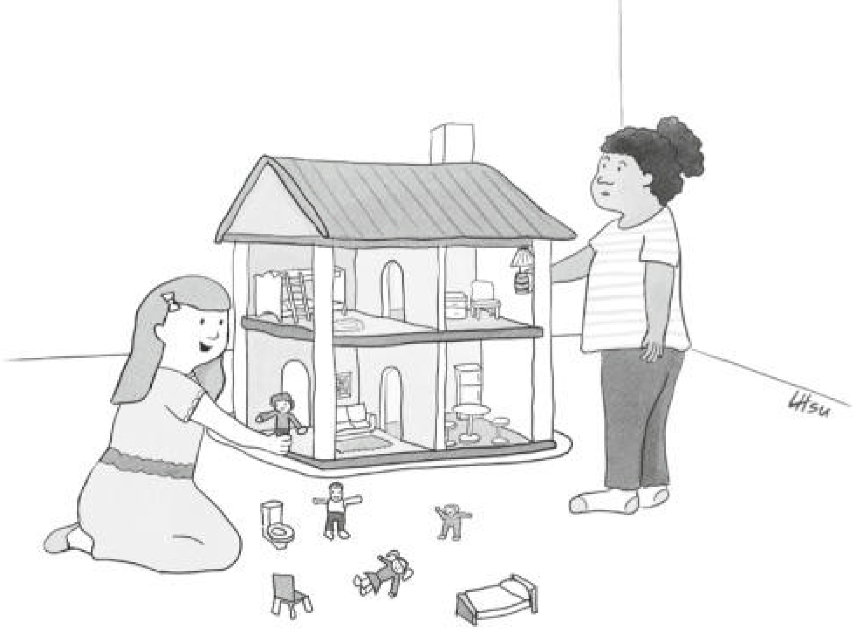
“Make sure to practice because if the devil challenges you to a fiddle contest and wins, he gets your soul.”

DAVID GOMBERG



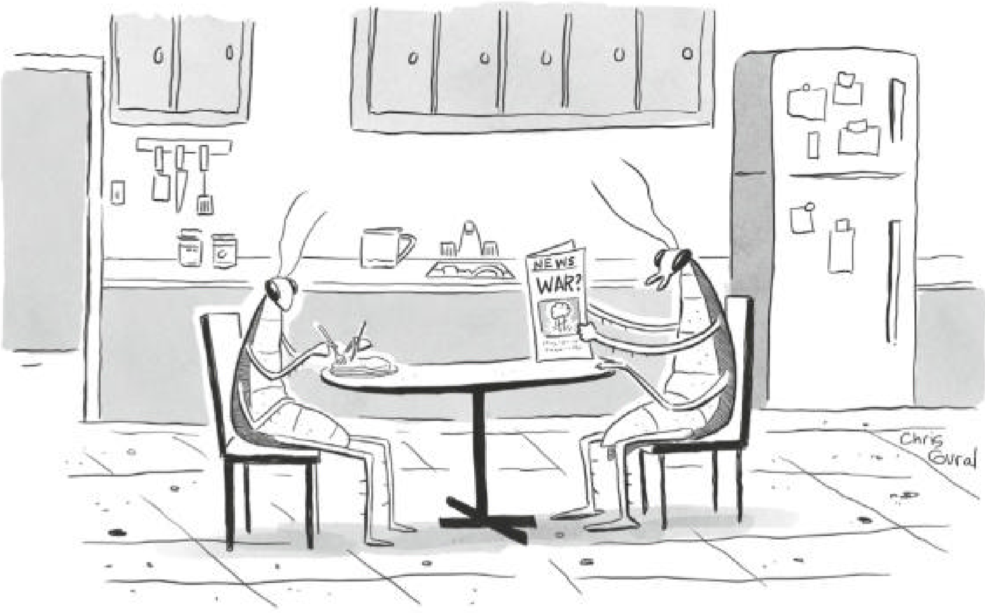
“Your next assignment is to stretch a recipe for baked squash into a rambling 5,000-word essay.”

JIM SHOENBILL



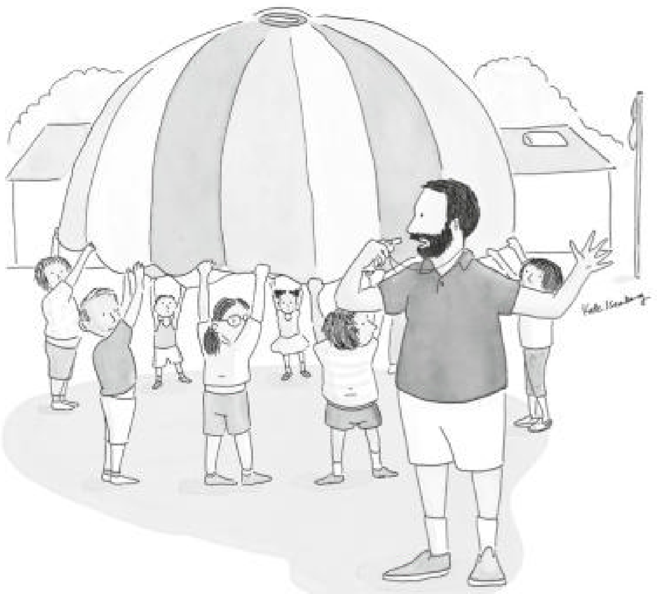
“Let’s kick the family out and play Airbnb.”

LYNN HSU



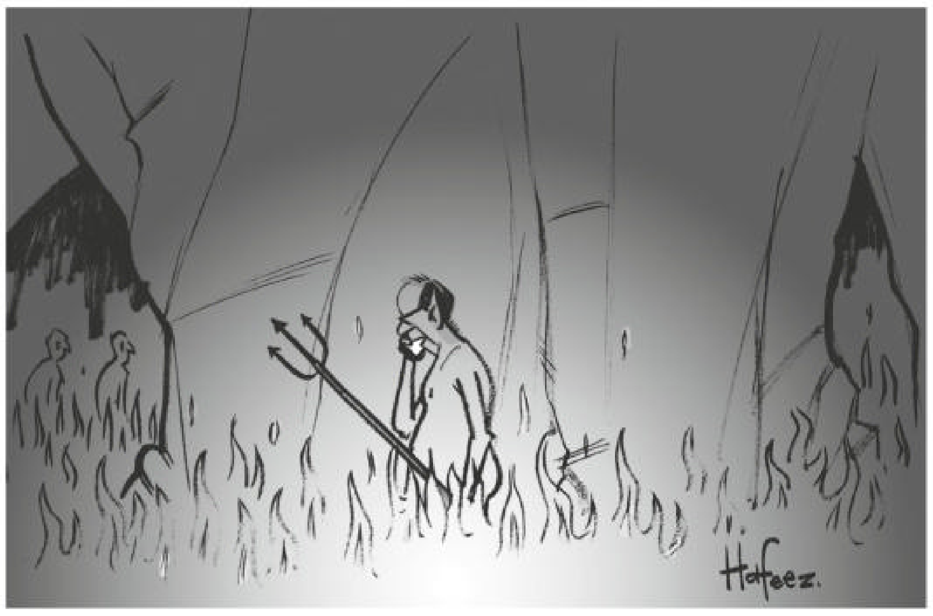
“Good news—looks like nuclear war.”

CHRIS GURAL



“OK, when I shout ‘Critical race theory!’ everyone run under the parachute and freak out.”

KATE ISENBERG



“I can’t talk—I’m in a really bad place right now.”

KAAMRAN HAFEEZ

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